WRITING ON THE EDGE :

WOMEN WRITERS FROM THE FRANCOPHONE CARIBBEAN AND THE LITERARY FIELD

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Elise Florence Finielz

December 2021

© 2021 Elise Florence Finielz

WRITING ON THE EDGE :

WOMEN WRITERS FROM THE FRANCOPHONE CARIBBEAN AND THE LITERARY FIELD

Elise Florence Finielz,

Cornell University 2021

This dissertation intervenes in the study of the particular social practices surrounding the creation and reception of literary works from women writers of the Francophone Caribbean in order to understand their recent growing contribution and influence in the Literary world, and also their struggle to become more visible despite historical marginalization. “Writing on the Edge: Women writers from the Francophone Caribbean and the Literary Field” questions and revisits the theoretical model of the literary field as conceived by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, through an intersectional approach. Women writers’ trajectories are to be understood at the crossroads of socially constituted dispositions and multiple contextual constraints in the light of not only class but also gender and race hierarchies.

The four chapters of the dissertation are devoted to case studies of four prominent women writers from different areas of the Francophone Caribbean (Simone Schwarz-Bart, Maryse Condé, Gisèle Pineau, and Yanick Lahens), drawing upon the biographical interviews that I carried out with them, and other different biographical sources (including autobiographical narratives, other published interviews, and academics studies about these authors). In addition to the institutional dynamics of

inequalities faced by women writers from the Francophone Caribbean, I also address the relationships between these authors and their literary work, their coming to writing and what it means for them to write. From a biographical analysis of their trajectory, I could analyze their ambivalent position (marginalized and to some extent recognized) which is in fact a precursor of an ethical and decolonial perspective that I analyze in their work. While moving away from a position of an "engaged" writer, they all reassert the power of transgression of female voices in Caribbean Literature. They insist on their singular creativity as writer, their artistic independence outside the limits of any political, feminist or literary movement, while honoring the silenced voices of history from a subjective perspective.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elise Finielz was born in Nimes, France. She holds her BA in Political Sciences and International Relations from the Institute of Political Studies of Strasbourg, France. She received a double MA in Sociology with a concentration on Social Welfare and Ageing (University of Grenoble and University of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne). In 2010, she came to live in the U.S where she had initially studied as an exchange student during her undergraduate studies. She received a MA in French and Francophone Studies from Syracuse University in 2010. Since then, she has been completing her Ph.D. at Cornell University, specializing in contemporary Caribbean and African Literature and Cinema of French expression.

To my family,

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am infinitely grateful to my committee members for giving me the freedom to pursue my intellectual interests, to explore beyond the confines of disciplinary borders, and to bring some of my earlier background in French sociology into my studies here at Cornell University. I thank Naminata Diabate for being such a great mentor, a supportive guide and insightful reader. I thank Grant Farred for his unconditional support, his sparkling comments, and generous revisions of my work. A special thanks to Natalie Melas, chair of my committee, for her wonderful guidance, enthusiastic support, brilliant and open-minded advice on my research.

This project would have never been possible without the generous support of Cornell University, in particular the Cornell University Library, Cornell University Graduate School, the Department of Romance Studies, the Einaudi Center, and the Cornell Child Care Program.

I would like to express my immense gratitude to the authors and publishing companies who generously accepted interviews with me:

* Simone Schwarz-Bart, Maryse Condé et Richard Philcox, Gisèle Pineau, Francesca Faithful, Michèle Robin-Clerc, Valérie Siracus from Guadeloupe ;

* Nicole Cage-Florentiny, Suzanne Dracius, Anique Sylvestre from Martinique ;

* Sybille Claude, Yanick Lahens, Kettly Mars, Emmelie Prophete, and Evelyne Trouillot from Haiti;

* Régine Jasor of *Editions Jasor*, Pierre Bisiou of *Le Serpent à Plumes* and Dieulermesson Petit Frère and Mirline Pierre of *Legs Editions*.

I thank Fanny and Laurent Darviot, Régine Laroche, Marie Larose and Evelyne Trouillot, the Centre Culturel Anne-Marie Morisset, for their help and fantastic hospitality in Guadeloupe and Haiti.

I thank Gwenaëlle Guingant at the library of Basse-Terre Guadeloupe (Médiatèque Caraïbe Bettino Lara) for giving me the opportunity to research in the special collection "Maryse Condé" and her generous support in my research.

I have received a precious help in translating the interviews from Hannah Hughes, Sarena Tien, Pierre-Elliot Caswell, Alex Lenoble, Jan Steyn, whom I thank dearly.

I would like to thank Jean Jonassaint, with whom I discovered Caribbean literature at Syracuse University, for his intellectual collaboration, and encouragement with my project. I would also like to thank Franketienne for his "Rencontre" (March 2019).

All my appreciation to Marlene Daut, Richard Turits and Robin Lauren Derby for giving me the opportunity to translate their remarkable historical work on Haiti and the Dominican Republic. My knowledge and interest in Haitian culture and spirituality have been enriched by the exceptional insights of Vodou priest Jean-Daniel Lafontant, Georges René, and visual artists André Eugène, Love Leonce, among many others.

Special thanks to Yen Vu, Neal Allar, Sarena Tien, Melanie Jones, Adam Schoene, Emily Baca Loaiza, Valeria Dani, Magdala Jeudy and Katherine Baker (from the English Language Support Office at Cornell University) who have read, commented,

and reviewed parts of my work.

I have been lucky to be part of the *Caribbean Reading Group* and the *World Gender in Translation Reading Group* here at Cornell University. I thank their members for the valuable discussions and inspiration.

Many thanks to Katy Kempf, Rebecca Davidson, Damien Tissot, Thierry Torrea, Colette Waldron, Tomás Beviá, Irène Eibenstein-Alvisi, Flavien Glidja, Mary K. Redmon, Gerard Aching, Laurent Dubreuil, Laurent Ferry, Mat Fournier, Patricia Keller, Tracy McNulty, Magalie Molinie, Edmundo Paz Soldán, Kathleen Perry Long, Simone Pinet, Enzo Traverso, Marie-Claire Vallois, among many others, for their support and warm welcome in the department of Romance Studies.

I also received tremendous help and invaluable support from family and friends outside Cornell University. My deepest gratitude goes to my parents Séverine et Jean-Pierre Finielz, my sisters Anne-Laure and Claire Finielz, my mother-in-law Kathleen Haines, my belated grandmother-in-law Patricia Waelder, Ross Getman, Dennis Swaney, and my dear friends, Moufida Oughabi, Zineb Rachedi Nasri and Capucine Bigote.

To my late grandmothers Suzanne Finielz and Hélène Broussous, and grandfathers, Charles Finielz and Daniel Broussous, whose lives, wisdom, courage, and affection are a constant source of inspiration.

Finally, I am forever grateful to my husband, Caleb Haines, and our two beautiful sons Elijah and Numa, for accompanying me on this journey.

TABLE OF CONTENT

INTRODUCTION
……..….11

Chapter One:
Precursor Simone Schwarz-Bart
……..….29

Chapter Two:
Maryse Condé and the *Republic of Letters*
…….....…95

Chapter Three:
Writing as *Crossing the Mangrove*, Gisèle Pineau's Version
……131

Chapter Four:
Writing Beyond Borders; Yanick Lahens and the Decolonial Turn in Haitian Literature
…….....181

BIBLIOGRAPHY
…….....232

APPENDIX 1
Interview with Maryse Condé
…….……252

APPENDIX 2
Interview with Simone Schwarz-Bart
…….277

APPENDIX 3
Interview with Gisèle Pineau
……...……..302

APPENDIX 4
Interview with Yanick Lahens
…….……353

INTRODUCTION

Since the pioneering essays in Maryse Condé's *La parole des femmes*[1], critical works have focused on the literary creation of women in the Caribbean[2]. From extensive surveys to more individually focused pieces, fiction from Caribbean women authors have been analyzed as voicing the female Caribbean experience and subjectivity, representing new paradigms of identity-formation, power relations and female agency, while renewing feminist discourses. The critical work on Caribbean women and literature is also attentive to the context of women's poetic creation to account for their marginalization or invisibility. For example, critics have pointed to the historical and ideological role played by women in the negritude movement [3], the controversies around the editorial history of Marie Chauvet's work[4] or Mayotte Capécia's novels.[5]

The critical essays in *Out of the Kumbla, Caribbean Women and Literature* points out the question of "voicelessness", urging critics "to encourage writing and to find all the lost writers- those many many women all over the region who have poems

[1] Maryse Condé, *La parole des femmes. Essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1979).
[2] Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds., *Out of the Kumbla. Caribbean Women and Literature* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990); Suzanne Rinne and Joëlle Vitiello, eds. *Elles écrivent des Antilles; Haïti, Guadeloupe, Martinique* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997); Adele Newson and Linda Strong-Leek, eds. *Winds of change; The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars* (New York: P.Lang, 1998); Samantha Haig. *Mapping A Tradition: Francophone Women's Writing from Guadeloupe* (Leeds: Maney for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2000).
[3] T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
[4] Kaiama Glover and Allessandra Benedicty-Kokken, eds., "Revisiting Marie Vieux Chauvet: Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Feminine," *Yale French Studies* 128 (2016).
[5] Myriam Cottias and Madeleine Dobbie. *Relire Mayotte Capécia. Une femme des Antilles dans l'espace colonial français* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

in drawers and inside books, pieces of fiction unpublished and confined to obscurity".[1] This statement in a critical work highlights the material and social concerns surrounding women writing, their invisibility, marginalization, and the essential role of critics in promoting and giving life to women writing. However, the recent emergence of women authors (since the 1970s) is usually noted and accepted as such, as an obvious fact; the first women are seen as precursors clearing the path for the following generation. My research studies the particular social practices surrounding the creation and reception of literary works from women writers of the Francophone Caribbean in order to understand their invisibility and marginalization and also their recent growing contribution.

Revisiting Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical model of the literary field, and its key concept (the *habitus*), my hypothesis is that women's writing practices in the Francophone Caribbean have to be understood in their social context of production, accounting for not only class but also gender and race. By studying the trajectories of prominent women writers from the French-speaking Caribbean, the objective is to understand the conditions contributing to the successful emergence of women writers on the literary scene and to account for their aesthetic choices using an intersectional perspective. I am also adopting Bourdieu's approach to the literary field examining the complexities pertaining to the situation of Caribbean women writers who negotiate between their local literary scene and the Parisian literary field.

[1] Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds. *Out of the Kumbla*, 17.

Pierre Bourdieu theory of the field

Bourdieu's work on literature is part of a much larger project to build a general theory of the "social order" that aims at understanding the general mechanisms at work in the reproduction of domination and power. The study of literature and cultural production was at the core of his broader theoretical work because it allowed him "to bring to the fore the role of the symbolic in the production and legitimation of social order."[2] *The Rules of Arts*: *genesis and structure of the literary field*, published in 1992 in France, is a compilation of 30 years of research.[3] His theory of the literary field was conceived as a way to transcend the classic antinomy between external and internal reading of a text[4](see the chapter "questions de méthode" in *Les règles de l'art* 249-297). Indeed, internal readings (hermeneutics and semiotics – structuralist approaches) which focus on the act of deciphering, rather than the act of creation, leave aside the question of the producer of cultural goods. External readings (historical, sociological, biographical) tend to reduce literature to their material conditions of production and reception, ignoring the specificity of symbolic goods. More particularly, Bourdieu's literary sociology aims at demystifying the illusions of biographical discourses that tend to sacralize the writer as a pure creator of an innate genius ("le créateur incréé").[5] By objectifying the social and historical determinants of cultural phenomena, Bourdieu's

[2] Anna Boschetti, "How Literary Field Can Contribute to Knowledge of World Literary Space," *Paragraph* 1 (Mar. 2012): 15.
[3] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Les règles de l'art; Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992.
[4] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Les règles de l'art,* 249-297.
[5] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Les règles de l'art,* 266.

intention was not only to rethink the discipline boundaries between literature and human sciences, but also to conceive a method of approaching the literary text.

Lucien Goldman posited a homology between the text and the social structures from which it emerges.[6] But from the Marxist perspective, this homology is mediated by the vision of the world carried by the social group to which the author belongs. The innovation in Bourdieu's theory is that the homology between the two types of structures (the structure of the novel and the structure of the social) is conditioned not just by a vision of the world (a representation). It is conditioned by a process of socialization and what results from this process (a key concept in Bourdieu's theory): the *habitus* of the author, within a space ruled by very specific constraints: the literary field. A field is a structured space of positions, a system of objective relations between agents and institutions that define one another and compete for the acquisition of a specific type of symbolic capital.

Using a metaphor inspired by physics, an agent, like an electron in an electromagnetic field, exerts a force on the field and modifies it. A field is a place of relations, competition and rivalries with the objective of acquisition and accumulation of capitals, which in the literary field include: economic profits, professional respectability, academic prizes, or other signs of recognition and legitimacy. If the literary field is little regulated or organized (does not require any specific diploma, technical training, or any official mode of entrance to the field) it is nonetheless ruled by its own laws and is relatively autonomous. In France, it is in the 19th century that a market of symbolic goods emerged, independent of the political and religious powers

[6] Lucien Goldmann, *Pour une sociologie du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

(the academy, the canons of "good taste" that they imposed). It also became more independent of the economic values that contributed to its development. When the book market became an industry, a field of mass production was specifically ruled by the market responding to external demand and oriented toward short-term profits. In reaction to this commercial production and circulation of literary works, another field emerged promoting another type of capital: the symbolic capital oriented toward aesthetic values, disinterested ("art for art' sake") and peer recognition as a mode of legitimacy.

The *habitus*, a term borrowed from scholastic philosophy, is a system of "durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them"[7]. Any strategies, any stances (prise de position), any intervention in the field, for example, to choose to write a novel, to use a specific style, to go to certain literary socialization places, to consider this editor rather than another, is the result of the incorporated disposition of the agent and the space of possibilities offered by the field. At the basis of this relationship between the habitus and the field, there is the unconscious and unquestioned belief that the game to be played is worth it. It is what Bourdieu calls: "*l'illusio*", which is the fundamental compliance with the rules of the games.[8]

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 72.
[8] Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art,* 245.

The value of studying the literary field is to question the traditional representations of the writer as an individual creator, showing that literary creation that is usually seen as an individual and free act also results in a cultural product whose relative value is socially determined. A growing number of researchers have appropriated Bourdieu's theory of the field and relational perspective to study "francophone" cases of literatures in Belgium, Switzerland, Quebec, and more recently in Africa and the Caribbean[9], and in a transnational perspective[10].

A biographical and intersectional approach

Sarah Burnautski in her seminal work, shows the limits of Pierre Bourdieu (and his successor Pascale Casanova) theory to question the hegemonic working of power in the process of recognition and consecration in the Parisian literary field.[11] Burnautski draws on Toni Morrison's analysis of the invisible violence of the color line in American literature[12] and Stuart Hall dynamic model of race as a discursive construct in constant negotiation to produce a regime of truth.[13] Her work critiques the hegemonic racialized regimes of representation at stake in the working of cultural recognition naturalized by the literary doxa. She shows how dominant representations

[9] Romuald Fonkua, Pierre Halen and Katharina Stadtler, eds., *Les champs littéraires africains* (Paris: Karthala, 2001). Buata Malela, *Les écrivains afro-antillais à Paris (1920-1960); Stratégies et postures identitaires* (Paris: Khartala, 2008). David K N'goran, *Le Champ littéraire africain : essai pour une théorie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009). Anthony Mangeon, ed., *Postures postcoloniales. Domaines africains et antillais* (Paris: Khartala, 2012).
[10] Tristan Leperlier, *Algérie, les écrivains dans la décennie noire* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2018).
[11] Sarah Burnauski, *Les frontières racialisées de la littérature française; Contrôle au faciès et stratégies de passage* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2017).
[12] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark, Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
[13] Stuart Hall, "Race, the Sliding signifier," in *The Fateful Triangle, Race, Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 57.

of race are to be taken into account in the symbolic competition of literary expression. Postcolonial writers may choose to conform to the exotic expectations of the literary center and the hegemonic rules of cultural expression.[14] The enduring label of "Francophone" literature is another characteristic of the symbolic hierarchies at stake in the Parisian literary field to deny the access of a universal recognition.

The recent emergence of intersectionality offers a promising method to analyze further the intricacies of race/gender and class power in the literary field. The term was coined by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989,[15] whose work is grounded in a long history of scholarly work and activism from women of color (Black feminism in the US, Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies in the South) and their fight against racism, sexism and for recognition. Drawing on the multiple dimensions of oppressive experience, this alternative epistemology places the experience of women of color at the forefront in the production of knowledge and politicization. It aims at subverting and decolonizing categories of knowledge. "Intersectionality takes up the political project of making the social and material consequences of the categories of gender/race/class visible but does so by employing methodologies compatible with the poststructuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmasking universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory working of power."[16] Intersectionality aims to build a multidimensional paradigm which thinks the heterogeneity of social class, of women as a group and of racialized groups without

[14] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic, Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).
[15] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-167.
[16] Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 201.

reifying them into multiple sub-categories. Literature, as a site of political agency of oppressed minorities, is essential for the advancement of sociological reflection. Collins, for example, incorporates literature in her sociological study of the situation of Black women in the US. She calls attention to the complexities of women lives, experiences and thoughts and emphasizes the importance of learning from the outsider "within."[17]

In my own research, following the sociologist Helma Lutz,[18] I use intersectionality as a methodological device in the analysis of biographical interviews and case studies of four authors from the Francophone Caribbean in order to understand the dynamics of the inequalities in the literary field. Race, class and gender are taken to be a social construct, produced by power relations. Women writers' trajectories are located at the crossroad of socially constituted dispositions and multiple contextual constraints in the light of gender, race and class hierarchies. Deconstructing the category of "women" as a stable sexual identity and the category of "Black writers" as a stable racial category also allows me to understand how writers negotiate their multiple and diverse identities to gain access to and position themselves in the literary field.

In order to comprehend the social and material conditions of women writers, I have deployed a qualitative methodology involving in-depth interviews with female

[17] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thoughts: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 1990).
[18] Helma Lutz, "Intersectionality brilliant career- How to understand the attraction of a concept," *Working Paper Series Gender, Diversity and Migration,* 1 (2014): 11-12, http://www.fb03.uni-frankfurt.de/51634119/Lutz_WP.pdf.

authors from Guadeloupe, Martinique and Haiti and their publishers. The objective of in-depth interviews was to gather information on their biographies, their literary careers and their positions in the French literary field in relation with the Caribbean. Moreover, interviews with five publishers (one in Haiti, two in Guadeloupe, and two in Paris) allowed me to understand the process and the constraints of publishing women writers from the Caribbean and to understand the role of the publishing companies in the different literary scenes (at a local level, national and international level).

I met with fourteen women writers, including the four who are the focus of this dissertation (see interviews in the appendix), with the objective of studying the trajectories of their literary recognition. Twelve out of fourteen have been published not only at a local level (in Guadeloupe, Martinique or Haiti), but also by an editor in Paris, regardless of their primary occupation. Most of them had a first career in addition to their literary activity but half of them devote their full time to their creative work. I was also able to get in touch and interview four of their publishers (2 of them based in Guadeloupe and 1 in Paris, 1 in Haiti) to understand the constraints and stakes of publication in Paris and at the local level in the Caribbean. The interview with the authors aimed at gathering biographical information: family background, education, professional activities; information on their literary career and their relation to the literary fields in France; the reception of their work; their political or militant activities. Although it varied, the interviews lasted between one and three hours. I got in touch with the writers through personal connections, social media or their publisher. I always received a very warm welcome. Coming as a Ph.D. student from Cornell University certainly played a role. In general, they all responded with a lot of honesty and

dedication to all of my questions. Usually, the interview took place in a public space (a coffee shop, a hotel, a cultural center, an office) or on occasion at the house of the writer. In Haiti, considering the difficulties of transportation in Port-au-Prince, the fact that I had the opportunity to use a taxi with an exceptionally talented driver was a true advantage to successfully meet the four authors. Before the interview, I prepared as much as possible: reading the author's works, literary interviews, media interventions. It not only helped establish trust during the interview but also allowed me to be responsive during the interviews while exploring the trajectory of their writing, their aesthetic choices, and their own position in the literary field. All of them signed a consent form to allow me to use their interview publicly in my dissertation.

On the sociological use of auto-biographical texts

Sociology has often distrusted the use of autobiographical accounts, considering the question of referentiality or at least considering the blurry boundaries between "real life" and fiction, between an exterior reality that would veil as it also unveils through the necessary mediated and codified means of language. This question of referentiality is reinforced by the belief in a transparent subject revealing his/her truth. However, one can wonder, as did Gerard Mauger in an article on the sociological use of literary autobiography, if the referential illusion does not stand for any text, whether literary or scientific.[19] Considering the literary text as a common-sense representation, the aim of Sociology would then be to decipher and extract its sociological meaning.

[19]Gérard Mauger, "Les autobiographies littéraires. Objets et outils de recherche sur les milieux populaires," *Politix*, 7, no. 27 (1994): 35.

Without conflating literature and sociology (as well as literature, common-sense and sociology), literary writing and scientific discourse share commonalities. These commonalities encompass the individual as a singularity whose experience is understood as a "metaphor and metonymy" of all the complex social and historical structure that sociological approach can unfold and lay out.[20] In the end, autobiographies are to be approached with caution, considering what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the biographical illusion", that is to say, the artificial reconstruction of a life narration, the insurance of its consistency, as it is necessarily a retrospective viewpoint on the past, dependent on memory as an inherent filter that reorders and interprets facts and events according to a linear and transparent meaning.[21] Autobiography, nevertheless, possesses a heuristic value for the sociologist as it includes information pertaining to the individual and his/her social activities in terms of class, education, career, writing practices, individual and collective positions, strategies, and lifestyle. The singularity of an individual case is always socially grounded. The sociologist, through the biographical method, aims at reconstructing the social biography of an individual within the broader historical context:

> "Loin du genre littéraire consistant à mettre sans cesse en avant une vie autonomisée qui semble avoir sa logique propre, indépendante de ses relations avec l'extérieur, le sociologue doit proposer une biographie qui nous livre, par un travail de reconstruction minutieux, les différentes conditions sociales de production de sa personne. La biographie n'est, pour lui, que la description d'un individu pris et sans cesse constitué dans un tissu de liens d'interdépendance multiples. Comprendre un cas, c'est comprendre tout ce qui, du monde social, s'est réfracté ou replié peu à peu en lui."
>
> "Far from the literary genre that aims to highlight an individualized life, which seems to have its own logic that is independent of its relationships with an external social reality, the sociologist must offer a biography that reveals the different social conditions at work in the production of the person, through the meticulous work of reconstruction. Biography is, for him, only the description

[20] Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), 46.
[21] Pierre Bourdieu, "L'illusion biographique," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 62, no.1 (June 1986): 69.

> of an individual, endlessly constituted in the social fabric of multiple and interdependent relationships. To understand a case is to understand the social world refracted or folded in an individual." [22]

Evaluating the autobiographical work of Caribbean female authors, I was confronted with the question of referentiality as they usually entertain a playful (and sometimes provocative) ambiguity among fiction, memory and truth. This is particularly the case in Condé first semi-autobiographical stories[23] (*Le Coeur à rire et à pleurer, conte vrais de mon enfance*), as reflected in the title with its oxymoron "true stories of my childhood". The term "tale," in French "conte," might refer to the oral tradition of the Caribbean. But the epigraph, a quotation from Marcel Proust's *Contre Saint Beuve* (posthumously published in 1951), further casts doubt on the status of memory and the veracity of her own narration: "Remembrance of things past is not what we retrieve from the mind."

Condé's second autobiographical essay, beyond its evocative title, *La vie sans fard*, that is translated as "True-to-Life autobiography"[24] is placed in the classical French tradition of memoirs. Quoting *Les Confessions* from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Condé, after disavowing autobiographical texts that according to her would lead to "un fatras de demi-vérité" ("a jumble of half-truths") and "des édifices de fantaisie d'où l'expression de la simple vérité s'estompe, puis disparaît?" ("a construction of fantasies where the simple truth fades"), pledges her sincerity. Her autobiographical

---

[22] Bernard Lahire, *Kafka, éléments pour une théorie de la création littéraire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 71. My translation. Throughout this dissertation, all translation are mine unless otherwise noted.
[23] Maryse Condé, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer : contes vrais de mon enfance* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999); *Tales from the Heart. True Stories from My Childhood.* Trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Soho Press Inc., 2001)
[24] Maryse Condé, *La vie sans fard* (Paris: JC Lattès, 2012); *What is Africa to me? Fragments of a True-to-Life Autobiography*. Trans. Richard Philcox (Salt Lake City: Seagull Books, 2017).

endeavor seals with the reader what Philippe Lejeune calls "an autobiographical pact" [25] :

> "Paraphrasant JJ Rousseau dans *Les Confessions* je déclare aujourd'hui que je veux montrer à mes semblables une femme dans toute la vérité de la nature et cette femme sera moi."
>
> "Paraphrasing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, therefore, in his *Confessions*, I declare today that 'I propose to show my fellows a woman as Nature made her and this woman shall be me."[26]

The referential question is however displaced within a comprehensive gesture:

> "Je tenterai plutôt de cerner la place considerable qu'a occupée l'Afrique dans mon existence et dans mon imaginaire."
>
> "I shall try, rather, to figure out the considerable role Africa has played in my life and imagination." [27]

The text appears as a reflection on the importance and meaning she attributes to the period of Africa within her whole trajectory (that the English translation directly evokes in its title), a very situated historical moment and all the personal suffering she endured as a mother and a Caribbean Black woman at that time.

In addition to her autobiographical writings, Maryse Condé has frequently shared her life stories in many of her critical essays and interviews[28], occasions of self-

[25] Pierre Lejeune. *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).
[26] Maryse Condé, *La vie sans fard*, 12; *What is Africa to me*, 2.
[27] Maryse Condé, *La vie sans fard*, 16; *What is Africa to me*, 6.
[28] See in particular: Maryse Condé, *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*, trans. Richard Philcox (Salt Lake City: Seagull Books, 2014); Bénédicte Boisseron, "Intimité: entretien avec Maryse Condé," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 13, no.1(2010): 131-153; Vévé Clark, "Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île; une interview de Maryse Condé," *Callaloo* 12, no.1 (Winter 1989): 85-133. Carla Fratta, "Entrevue avec Maryse Condé," *Caribana* 1 (1990): 85-92; Paola Ghinelli, "Entretien avec Maryse Condé," in *Archipels littéraires. Chamoiseau, Condé, Confiant, Brival, Maximin, Laferrière, Pineau, Dalembert, Agnant* (Montréal: Mémoire d'encrier, 2005): 33-49. Louise Hardwick, "J'ai toujours été une personne un peu à part': questions à Maryse Condé," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 9, no.1 (2006): 111-124. Françoise Pfaff, *Entretiens avec Maryse Condé* (Paris: Karthala, 1993); Françoise Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); Françoise Pfaff, *Nouveaux entretiens avec Maryse Condé; écrivain et témoin de son temps* (Paris: Karthala, 2016); Marie-Agnès Sourieau, "Entretien avec Maryse Condé: de l'identité

representations at various points of her career. The analyst is then able to corroborate the author's words while taking into account the context of their enunciation, to pinpoint the evolution in her position or point of view and decipher its ambiguity or ambivalence. Nevertheless, working with those interviews and her autobiographical writings present a limit. I usually have access to only her only point of view on her life event and I did not interview her surrounding to give a different perspective on her experiences.

Furthermore, the question of truth telling needs to be placed within the context of her trajectory as a writer.[29] As I will come back to this question later when I analyze the reception of her first novel in chapter two, it is important to comprehend the particular mode of investment in literature for Condé, as a project to come to terms with a certain number of real-life experiences within the broader collective contradictions of postcolonial times. On the other hand, looking at the reception of her work allows us to comprehend the "gender" effect in the process of the recognition of women's work. Attacked precisely on her "morality" as a woman, she had to defend her own aesthetic research and the importance of her fictional creativity when she wrote her first novel *Heremakhonon.* She therefore might have adopted positions that can appear contradictory: defending the auto-referential fictional structure of her

Culturelle," *The French Review* 72, no.6 (May 1999): 1091-1098. Mohamed B. Taleb-Khyar, "An Interview with Maryse Condé and Rita Dove," *Callaloo*, 14, no.2 (Spring 1991): 347-366.

[29] I am indebted to Kavita Singh to point out the complex relations of Maryse Condé with truth telling during her presentation "Maryse Condé's Gendered Exhibition: Literature and Feminity in Exile" in the panel "Performance in the Caribbean Text" at the 41st Caribbean Studies Association Conference, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, June 6-11, 2016. Kavita Singh noticed the ambiguity of Maryse Condé position with truth telling, especially regarding her first novel, as she would have confided her in an interview that all the events described in the novel were her true story, which she had denied previously. See also Singh's chapter on Maryse Condé in her forthcoming book *Carnival Language: Performance and Multilingualism in the Post/Colonial Caribbean,* (New-Brunswick: Rutgers University Press).

writing[30], but asserting on other occasions that her fictions cannot be understood if one does not know her life.

Condé's autobiography could be seen as holding a therapeutic value. This writing may be a way not only to unveil her own life events, but also to "re-invent" herself as noted by a critic:

> "La relation au littéraire réussit là où la relation de la protagoniste à l'autre échoue, comme si la littérature seule permettait de combler des manques de tous ordres, d'inventer des personnages par-delà les personnes, de rejouer le destin, de se ré-inventer. La littérature apparaît donc comme une thérapie de la fuite, une fuite dans un imaginaire créateur dont *La Vie sans fards* serait le fruit."
>
> "The relationship to the literary succeeds where the relationship of the protagonist with the Other fails, as if literature alone, could fill any gaps, create characters beyond individuals, re-perform one's destiny and, re-invent oneself. Literature appears as a therapy of evasion, a flight in a creative imaginary that would produce *What is Africa to me ?*" [31]

From the above, one can agree that literature appears as a successful enterprise as a fiction when life has been challenging. However, it seems that writing for Condé, as she reflects upon and confronts her own life experience, is a way to open debate, rather than escape to a fictional imaginary or uncontested narrative. Inviting the reader on her self-reflexive journey, the reader will encounter more questions than answers. The interpretation of a life event opens up a space for reflection. The answer is not entrenched (is there really an answer?), it is only deferred, placed under the sign of "différance." For Condé, self-knowledge as identity can only express itself in its own movement or confrontation. It is, as Edouard Glissant would call it, the affirmation of a rhizhome identity as it grows and evolves through the encounter with the other

[30] See the preface of the second edition of *Heremakhonon*, entitled with the French translation: Maryse Condé, *En attendant le bonheur* (Paris: Seghers, 1988), where Maryse Condé defends the literary project of her first novel and her fictional aesthetic intentions in a preface.
[31] Hél-Bongo, Olga. "Enonciation du malaise dans *La vie sans fards*," In *Maryse Condé en tous ses ailleurs,* Françoise Simasotchi-Bronès, ed. (Paris: Editions L'improviste, 2014), 161.

(herself as other, the reader, the responder, etc.). More than a literary aesthetic choice or a fictional and therapeutic endeavor, it is a relation to truth that Condé puts forward in her autobiographical works. It also goes beyond what could be seen in European Sociology of Literature as a "posture" as defined by Jerôme Meizoz: "a singular way to occupy a position in the literary field". It is not just about creating a public image of an author who would play the role of a rebellious writer, of someone who is not afraid to contradict oneself. It reveals, instead, Condé's courage (courage in its etymological sense, coming from the French word "Coeur" "Heart"- honesty and force from the heart), her capacity to express herself honestly, to question and provoke thinking beyond categorical thinking. Indeed, what Caribbean writers and their literature claim is an ethics, an ethics as a dynamic to enlighten and move beyond the existing categories, to see the positive force of creation beyond the violence of representations. This is a thinking in motion, in the dynamic of its own movement. And it is a decolonial thinking, a thinking in the presence of the diversity of the world in its infinite, beyond social, racial, gendered categories, beyond the visible world. It is thinking about life in all its mystery. And it is a perspective that I could see with other Caribbean writers (male and female, including but not limited to those who are the subject of this research). I came to this realization studying in particular Simone and André Schwarz-Bart, encountering also on my way the philosophical and (secular) theological perspective of post-Shoah radical thinkers (with Francine Kaufmann, Emmanuel Levinas, André Neher, Marc-Alain Ouaknin, Delphine Horvilleur, Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous…) whose work is committed to think beyond the violent categories of language and against a corrupted vision of truth that 'Western' rationalist

philosophy has pursued, truth as an absolute and immanent category to be discovered or recovered.

And this, in turn, also helps my own analysis of Caribbean women writing and their position in the literary field. From a biographical analysis of their trajectory, I could analyze their ambivalent[32] position (marginalized and to some extent recognized). The sociological categories and history (the individual and collective) were useful in unveiling the violence of a situation or an experience, the working of power relations in their marginalization from the literary field. But I could also see the positive meaning the writers I interviewed attached to a violent or negative situation, the epistemological privilege and creative force that came from their in-between position. Looking at their novels gave insight into this ethical/decolonial perspective, this thinking in motion, in a movement open to the other. The term "decolonial" appears in this research in a broad sense, as questioning further the legacy and categories of thinking inherited from the colonial period. In the case of Yanick Lahens, it means incorporating the perspective of those who have been silenced or sidelined in the history of Haiti. This decolonial perspective helped me understand the female authors' precursor position: a politically subversive position which complicates and moves beyond the categories of an "engaged" writer, as someone who writes within the parameters of a political or feminist agenda. Looking at their works of fiction through this ethical perspective was crucial to better envision their identity as writer, their position on the literary field and their contribution to aesthetic innovation.

[32] "Ambivalent" is an adjective composed of the prefix "ambi" which means in Latin "both" and the root word "valere" – "valoir" in French, "be worth." When I use the term, I mean for it to express the value of perspective, being the contrast and spectrum of light and dark.

The first chapter is devoted to Simone Schwarz-Bart, her writing career and aesthetic creation in collaboration with her husband and writer André Schwarz-Bart. Immediately recognized for her literary fiction *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972), the groundbreaking novel was also critiqued for its lack of political content. Reading her novel in the light of her husband's acclaimed first novel's *Le dernier des Justes* (1959) renewed my understanding of the poetic intention, the subversive decolonial vision and the precursory political significance it purports.

The second chapter on the pioneering author Maryse Condé examines her initial marginalized position in the Parisian literary field, as a Black women writer in order to understand why her first two novels, *Heremakhonon* (1976) and *Une saison à Rihata* (1981) did not receive any critical attention, while the third one *Segou* (1981, 1982) became a best-seller.

The third chapter traces Gisèle Pineau's career in the margins of the *Créolité* movement and her particular approach of literature as a "bio-graphy" understood in the etymological sense of the word as the account or record of life, blurring the boundaries between fiction and "real" life, the intimate stories and the collective history.

The fourth chapter focuses on the writer Yanick Lahens, part of a new generation of female authors from Haiti. It explores her writing career and literary creation from the liminal space she occupies in Haiti, an in-between and uncomfortable position, on the edge of the privileged and Western world. Her work aims at renewing the decolonial project started with the Haitian revolution and independence in 1804, to rethink the conditions of emancipation for the contemporary Haitian society.

CHAPTER 1

PRECURSOR SIMONE SCHWARZ-BART

In this chapter, I propose looking at the ambivalent position of the women writer from the French Caribbean in the French literary field, via a close study of the life and first work of fiction of Simone Schwarz-Bart in the light of the life and work of her husband André Schwarz-Bart. Simone came to writing through her husband André, who had won the Goncourt Prize in 1959 for his first novel *Le dernier des Justes* (*The last of the Just).*[1] Her first work of fiction, *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* (*The bridge of Beyond*) [2] also received relative success in France and Guadeloupe (Grand Prix des lectrices d'Elles), while being critiqued for its lack of political militancy. Indeed, like André for the Jewish community, Simone troubles the position of the "engaged" writer in the Sartrian sense of the term.[3] She writes for her collective Guadeloupean community, bringing a feminine voice in her first novel, but her work of fiction does not lend to an open political message. And she does not associate herself with any public and official political representation or feminist militantism. Re-reading her first novel *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle*, I will reconsider this relatively marginalized and "disengaged" position in the literary field

[1] André Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes* (Paris:Seuil, 1959) / *The Last of the Just* trans. Stephen Becker (New York: Antheneum, 1960).
[2] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) / *The Bridge of Beyond,* trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Penguin Random House, 2013).
[3] See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Orphée noir*, Preface in *Anthologie de la poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), ix-xliv; see also : Jean-Paul Sartre, Qu'est-ce que la littérature (Paris: Gallimard, 1948); Jean-Paul Sartre, "Présentation," *Les Temps Modernes* 1 (Oct. 1945), 1.

as a precursor position of what now has been seen as the "ethical turn" of the postcolonial Caribbean writer of the French Caribbean, with the leading figure of Edouard Glissant, concurrent to a loss of impetus of the independence movement in Guadeloupe and Martinique in the 1980s.[4]

To understand the innovative fictional work and position of Simone Schwarz-Bart in the French literary field, I will first look at her biographical and writing trajectory in the light of André Schwarz-Bart's biographical and writing trajectory as they both share a collective history of slavery and deportation. The biographical approach led me to a reading of Simone Schwarz-Bart's first novel through André first novel, which in turn enlightened her ambivalent but precursor position as a Caribbean woman in the French literary field.

I. Social trajectory of Simone Schwarz-Bart

1. A childhood in-between French and Creole culture

Born in 1938 in the Southwestern France, to a military father and a mother who was a primary school teacher, Simone Brument returned to her native island, Guadeloupe, at the age of three months. While her father remained away to complete his career in the military, she grew up with her mother, in the countryside, in the

[4] See Peter Hallward, "Edouard Glissant: from Nation to Relation," in *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001). Peter Hallward claims of two phases in the work of Edouard Glissant, a militant one and depoliticized one, which has raised debate among scholars (See Celia Britton, "Globalization and Political Action in the Work of Edouard Glissant,"*Small Axe* 30 (November 2009); Chris Bongie, *Friends and enemies, the Scribal politics of Post/Colonial Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008); Nick Nesbitt, "Edouard Glissant and the Poetics of Truth," *The C.L.R. James Journal* 18, no.1 (Fall 2012), 102-115.

village of "Trois rivières" (between Goyave and Basse-Terre). From her childhood, a few elements are important to consider her future as a writer. First, to place her trajectory within the generations of women who had a strong influence : her own mother who was a primary schoolteacher, and her paternal grandmother.

Orphaned at the age of eight, Simone's mother was adopted and raised by a wealthy family. Unlike the other children, she studied hard to successfully complete her studies, and fulfill her mother's wish, a wish expressed in a letter that she carried with her all through her life: "n'oublie jamais que seule l'instruction te permettra de gagner honnêtement et facilement ta vie. Ta mère, Thérèse Didier" [Never forget that only education will allow you to earn a living honestly and easily. Your mother Thérèse Didier.] [5] Indeed, teaching was among the very few options that were available to women of color who had successfully completed the "brevet supérieur,"[6] in terms of career, salary (although lower than their male counterparts) and social status in Guadeloupe in the early 20th century.[7]

Simone Schwarz-Bart's mother became a primary school teacher in the countryside, who believed in the promise of the school system as a way out of the plantations[8]. For her, speaking French and accessing the legitimate French culture taught at school was a necessity, one that will be questioned by the following

[5] Yann Plougastel and Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Nous n'avons pas vu passer les jours* (Paris: Grasset, 2019), 28.
[6] Equivalent to a high school diploma.
[7] Clara Palmiste, "La sécularisation du personnel enseignant en Guadeloupe (1880-1914). Enjeux sexués et raciaux en contexte colonial," *Clio Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 50 (2019): 55, 58.
[8] In the movie *La rue Cases-Nègres* by Euzhan Palcy (1983), a cinematographic adaptation of Joseph Zobel's novel, the school teacher writes on the blackboard: "L'instruction est la clé qui ouvre la deuxième porte de notre liberté." ["Education is the key that opens the second door to our freedom"], a statement that a whole generation of teachers and parents in the Caribbean endorsed.

generation who will reject its colonial content and its alienating nature.[9] In a society that bore vestiges of a former system of slavery, the secular public school system instituted by the third Republic was a way of promotion for a few, while also playing a central role in reproducing the social, racial and gender-based inequalities and power structures in the colony. If in France, Bourdieu and Passeron[10] have shown the duplicity of the universalist egalitarian principle that school is supposed to promote by imposing the cultural *habitus* of dominant social classes, the school system exerts a *symbolic violence*, while being blind to it as it rests upon the assumption of the legitimate superiority of this particular ethnocentric culture. In short, by holding a monopoly on inculcating the legitimate culture, the school system achieves, in the most concealed manner, the reproduction and legitimation of social hierarchies, hence favoring its legitimate recipients: the children of privileged backgrounds, who already possessed the cultural capital taught at school and would acquire quickly the pedagogical education transmitted. For the others, especially for children of a lower social background, instruction usually functions to cultivate the belief in the superiority of the legitimate culture and attempts to develop a feeling of inferiority in those who fail to assimilate, more so than the command of the cultural content and

[9] For example, Aimé Césaire is remembered as a student for his brilliance but also his rebellious mind. His paternal grandfather was the first Black teacher in Martinique and his grandmother was literate and taught her children how to read and write; his father attended secondary school, became a financial officer and raised his family to a middle-class status. Césaire developed a love for literature (thanks also to the personal library of French classics that his father owned) and at the same time a strong resistance to the assimilation program that he received at school. (See Renée Larrier, "A tradition of literacy: Césaire in and out of the classroom," *Research in African Literatures* 40, no.1 Spring 2010 36-37). Larrier also notes that Césaire was exposed through oral traditions to the knowledge and history of slavery at an early age and belonged to a family that did not reproduce class-based prejudices and were close to the people's rural values, which is also the case for Simone Schwarz-Bart (and Yanick Lahens in Haiti).

[10] Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les héritiers. Les étudiants et la culture* (Paris: Le sens commun, 1964).

critical thinking that school is supposed to teach. In the French Caribbean, *symbolic violence* intensifies as it takes its roots in the colonial domination and the attempt to erase or silence any traces of the local Black culture and history; the mimetic discourse of the school legitimized by its civilizing mission strongly opposes the "énergumène" discourse of the children and appears not only distant for its content but also the language used.[11] In a situation of diglossia, most of the teachers, who were from Guadeloupe and Martinique, had internalized the dominant republican ideology. The local culture for a long time was completely absent from the curriculum. All the literary texts, lessons of history and geography pertained to a context almost always disconnected to the students' environment and own background. The program glorified the French empire and promoted the colonial enterprise. Children would not only learn about "their ancestors the Gauls" but all the French rivers and their tributaries while the history and geography of the Caribbean islands were not even mentioned in class, the ethnocentric imprint of the colonial education policy leading to the most absurd paradoxes.[12] The history of slavery or the Saint Domingue revolution were not in the official program for example. Speaking Creole was prohibited and its repression in the classroom would take for a long time the form of physical and psychological punishments, such as the "coin method": any pupil who had the misfortune to utter a word in creole was forced to hold a coin in his hand that he would pass to the next one caught at fault, or a wooden board called "La plaquette

[11] André Lucrèce, *Civilisés et Energumènes. De l'enseignement aux Antilles* (Paris: L'harmattan, 1981), 125.
[12] Lucrèce, *Civilisés et énergumènes,* 126.

d'infamie."[13] At the end of the day, all the culprits would receive swift raps with a ruler. This method was present in the African French colonies, but also in the French territory where any traces of regional "patois" in the classroom were severely banished. Schools, as the right arm of the assimilation policy, accomplished the mission to impose French Parisian and bourgeois culture as the legitimate culture, the benchmark for prestige through the acquisition of its language, literature, music… This "Gallicization" enterprise had long-lasting effects on the collective consciousness of Guadeloupe and Martinique: the internalization of the French cultural model and the negation of the specific culture that had emerged from the experience of slavery. The politics of "assimilation" imposed with the support and compliance of the local authorities, was, therefore, in the meantime a process of acculturation.

Simone Schwarz-Bart remembers how her mother was very strict and rigorous, entirely devoted to her job, bearing the responsibility of an entire countryside school alone, and teaching children belonging to families of farmers in one single all-level overpopulated classroom (100 to 130 students). The children often could only attend school sporadically as they were required to work in the fields with their parents. Consequently, she did not only teach a multi-level class, but she would help those who were late to catch up during recess and when school was not in session, devoting a great time to tutoring students outside school hours. If in a situation of diglossia, most of the teachers had internalized the dominant republican ideology, teaching was also a mission to educate students in the broader humanist sense of the word, that is the

[13] Lucrèce, *Civilisés et énergumènes,* 126. See also Michel, Giraud. *Races et classes à la Martinique: les relations sociales entre enfants de différentes couleurs à l'école* (Paris: Anthropos, 1979), 241-242.

promise to raise one's spirit through the "enlightenment" of knowledge in the noble sense of the term. Simone Schwarz-Bart emphasizes the importance of chants and moral principles[14] to not only create adhesion to the legitimate discourse of the school institution but also to help students self-reflect and acquire critical thinking skills:

> "C'était des chants qui vantaient aussi le savoir, ils étaient peut-être naïfs en nous proposant ce programme mais c'était un programme qui pour cette génération-là était, on y croyait vraiment, on croyait vraiment à l'instruction, on croyait vraiment aux lumières et on pensait que vraiment c'était la clef d'une meilleure, d'une meilleure humanité ; donc c'était très important ces chants et ces morales, il y avait la leçon de morale et l'explication. Il y avait la phrase à commenter tous les jours et qui était au tableau noir et que l'on commentait. Elle, elle commentait la phrase et ensuite elle demandait à chaque élève son sentiment, comment il avait reçu cette phrase comment cela se passait, ce qu'il voyait, parce que en même temps ça formait des êtres humains, et ça ne formait pas non plus que des têtes pleines de savoir, ça formait aussi un esprit capable aussi d'analyser. "
>
> "They were songs then that also praised knowledge, and actually they were perhaps naive by promoting this curriculum with us but it was a curriculum which for this generation was… you really believed in it, you really believed in education; you really believed in knowledge and you really thought that it was the key to better humankind. So these songs and these lessons were very important, because in there you had the moral lesson and the explanation. The schoolmistress was never satisfied… There was the sentence to comment on every day, which was on the blackboard, and you gave your commentary. She would then comment on the sentence herself and then she would ask each pupil what they thought, how they had understood this sentence, how was it, what they saw… because meanwhile this molded human beings, and it didn't just fill heads with knowledge, it also molded a mind capable of analyzing." [15]

As a schoolteacher, Simone Schwarz-Bart's mother received a small salary that enabled her and her daughter to live without material concerns, but with a strong sense of sharing with the community and refusing the idea of material accumulation.

---

[14] Here is an excerpt of a song that exemplifies Simone Schwarz-Bart's point and that she sang to me during the interview: "Travaillons pour nous instruire, pour comprendre et pour aimer. Quand les couples seront lire, ils cesseront de s'égorger. Sous les cieux remplis d'étoiles, resplendira la beauté. Nous irons à pleine voiles sur les bancs de la Fraternité." / "Let's work to learn, to understand, and to love. When couples are well read, they will cease cutting each other's throats. Under the skies filled with stars, the beauty will be resplendent. We will voyage with full sails on the waves of Brotherhood." You see, these were not idle words; the ideals behind education were expressed in the songs. It was not easy, we had to internalize the words we uttered, and they had to put us in a position to carry them out. So, the professors didn't make us sing just anything." Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Hannah Hughes, July 2017.

[15] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Hannah Hughes, July 2017.

> “ Donc ma maman a toujours été une personne très libre parce que elle a vécu toute la guerre sans mon père , seule à combattre, à voir aussi la misère des gens, c’était une personne compatissante , elle avait un revenu mensuel par rapport à sa fonction , institutrice, elle donnait de l’argent à tout le monde, les gens qui voulaient ouvrir un petit négoce, les gens qui voulaient marier leur enfant et qui n’avaient pas , et qui voulaient ne pas être dans l’humiliation , et ma maman a toujours été comme ça. J’étais enfant unique pourtant mais quand je lui demandais : « j’aimerais bien une nouvelle robe », elle me disait : « toi tu as 3 robes et tu sais qu’il y a ta petite copine elle en a qu’une, que sa maman lave, fait sécher le jeudi pour lui remettre le vendredi matin pour qu’elle soit propre. Alors avant de te donner une 4 ème robe, je vais peut-être en donner une autre à la petite fille qui n’en a qu’une. Qu’est-ce que tu penses de ça ? » Alors je disais « mais oui. C’est normal. » Et donc il n’y avait pas de désir d’empiler chez ma mère, d’empiler des richesses, de ci de ça, pas du tout, non, non non, elle allait à l’essentiel. Et ainsi j’ai été élevée dans l’austérité mais je n’en ai absolument pas souffert, je ne la ressentais pas d’ailleurs. C’est maintenant que je vois que j’étais dans l’austérité mais pour moi je ne l’ai pas vécu comme tel, car tout le monde était dans l’austérité. ”

> “So my mom was always a very independent person also because she had to get through the whole war without my father, fighting all alone, and also seeing people's poverty. She was a compassionate person. Since she had a monthly income from her teaching job, she lent money to everyone, people who wanted to open a small business, people who wanted to marry their child and didn't have the means, and didn't want to suffer the humiliation, this and that. And well mom was always that way. I was an only child but when I asked her: “I would like a new dress,” she would say to me: “*you* have 3 dresses and you know that little girlfriend of yours, she only has one that her mom washes and dries Thursday to give back to her Friday morning so that she is clean. So before I give you a 4th dress, perhaps I will give another one to the little girl who only has one. What do you think of that?” So I would say “yes, of course. It's no big deal.” And so for my mother it wasn’t important to accumulate things, to accumulate belongings, some of this and that, not at all, no, no, no, she stripped down to the essentials. And so I had a pretty austere upbringing but I absolutely did not suffer from it, in fact I didn't even notice it. It's now that I see it was so austere, but I didn't experience it as such, because everyone was living in austerity.”[16]

In addition, Simone Schwarz-Bart acquired through her mother not only the French legitimate culture but a critique of the colonial prejudices, as she taught her daughter to develop a strong sense of self and how to navigate life with “a lighthearted soul.” From her, Simone learned ethical values rooted in the specific historical context of the Caribbean and Catholic faith. To stand against racism meant both to be lucid on common racist insults but also to know how to deflect them, to build the inner strength

[16] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Hannah Hughes, July 2017.

to not lose energy or belittle herself by responding with dignity and to forgive as "there is mercy for all sins" (a French expression rooted in a Judeo-Christian faith). This teaching appears in the following revelation:

> "Nous, on a été formés dans les usines à sucre et nous sommes devenus des usines nous-mêmes. Et nous sommes des usines parce que c'est nous qui nous fabriquons ; nous nous faisons ; c'est toi qui dois te faire et c'est toi qui dois aussi pardonner et leur pardonner. Ma mère était du principe : « à tout péché miséricorde ». S'ils te traitent de négresse, vole au-dessus de tout ça, parce que « ma fille tu sais qui tu es, personne ne peut t'apprendre qui tu es. Laisse les gens dire ceci, cela. Toi tu sais qui tu es et tu connais ta valeur, contente-toi de ça et ne réponds pas. Déjà s'ils disent ça c'est qu'ils ne veulent pas t'entendre, te voir, ne veulent pas t'écouter. Déjà tu discutes de leurs appréciations c'est que tu tiens compte de leur appréciation, c'est que tu leur donnes une valeur, alors qu'ils n'en ont pas, alors arrêtes ça , vole, vole, trouve le moyen d'avoir des ailes, ne prends pas ça sur ton cœur."
>
> "My mother always used to tell me: 'we were trained in the sugar factories and we became factories ourselves. And we're factories because what we manufacture is ourselves; we make ourselves; you have to make yourself and it's also you who must forgive and forgive them'. My mother was of the belief: 'mercy for all sin.' If they treat you like a Negress, rise above it, because "my daughter you know who you are, nobody can teach you who you are. Let people say this, that. You know who you are and you know your value, be satisfied with that and don't talk back. It's useless to talk back to people who don't want to listen. For one thing, if they've said that to you it's because they don't want to listen, they don't want to see you, they don't want to listen to you. For another, if you start discussing their prejudices it's because you're taking their prejudices to heart, it's because you're giving them weight, so stop that. And rise, rise, rise above. Find a way to have wings, don't take that in your heart. And accomplish your destiny."[17]

Raised in the Catholic faith, however, Simone Schwarz-Bart received a religious education from her mother herself who served as her spiritual guide as she refused to send her daughter to Bible studies and was very critical of the Catholic establishment in Guadeloupe and Catholic ideology. For example, she refused to believe that only the Jewish were responsible for the death of Christ although the idea of a deicide people was still prevalent in Christian theology.[18] At the time she was

[17] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Hannah Hughes, July 2017.
[18] It is only in 1962 that the declaration "Nostra Aetate" of the Second Vatican Concile will put an end to the "teaching of contempt", an expression of the French Jewish Historian Jules Isaac and will establish an interfaith dialogue between the Catholic Church and other religions. André Schwarz-Bart's novel *The last of the Just* and Jules Isaac *Jesus and Israël* will stand as a reference during the work of the Concile (See: Malka Markovich, "Genèse d'une réflexion sur les sensibilités collectives des années

growing up, Simone recalls that the church in Guadeloupe continued to perpetuate a colonial narrative of legitimate white privilege in the spatial division of the church assembly (front benches were reserve for Beke's families), in the ceremonial procession (only white children would carry the virgin) and in the racially misconstrued interpretation of the Bible: black people were still standing as "des sacs à péché," sons and daughters of Satan, as exemplified by the story of Saint Michel bringing down the black demon.

> "On était les enfants illégitimes du Bon Dieu, voilà on était des illégitimes, voilà, on savait qu'on n'était pas des héritiers, les héritiers, les héritiers c'étaient les Békés, les blancs, parce que nous. Par exemple à l'Église, on vous l'a dit, à l'Église il y avait les premiers bancs qui étaient réservés, avec les noms de ces familles, et nous on devait aller à l'arrière. Par exemple, quand il y avait des cérémonies de couronnement de la Vierge, parce que le mois de mai c'est le mois de la Vierge. Et tous les après-midis on va, on chante, on fait des chapelets à la Vierge, « je vous salue, je vous salue Marie. » et au mois de Mai il y a le couronnement de la Vierge, et chaque fois il n'y a jamais eu une petite fille de couleur qui a eu, la grâce ou le grand honneur de promener la Vierge, on n'était pas digne. Nos mains étaient des mains sales, nous étions des personnes à péchés. Nous étions des « sacs à péchés. » voilà forcément, ça on savait, c'était le prêtre même qui nous inculquait ça également nous notre âme était plus noire que celle des autres. De toute façon on est des coupables, on est des coupables, coupables de quoi ? je n'en sais rien. Je n'en sais rien. En tous les cas on le savait, puisque, il y avait Saint Michel, il y avait une grande dévotion à Saint Michel, Saint Michel qui terrasse le démon, qui terrasse Satan qui est une personne noire , St Michel est beau, blond avec son épée, et il y a le démon noir , comment nous comment ne pas se reconnaitre pas se reconnaitre ..
> ***S'identifier***
> Oui s'identifier, à quoi ? comment ne pas s'identifier, Satan, le démon, un amalgame et voilà…"

> "We were illegitimate children, we were illegitimate children. We knew we were not the heirs, the heirs, the heirs were *Békés*, [19]they were white…. For example, at Church, maybe they told you too… at Church there were the reserved benches up front with the names of these families, and us, we had to sit in the back. For example, when there were coronation of the Virgin ceremonies, because May is the month of the Virgin. And every afternoon we go, we sing, we make rosaries to the Virgin, "Hail, Hail Mary." And in May there's the coronation of the Virgin, and not a single time has a little colored girl gotten, how should I put it, the grace or the great honor to carry the Virgin, we were not worthy. Our hands were dirty hands, we were sinful people. We were "sin bags." So, of course, we knew that, it was the priest, it's the priest himself who instilled this in us, so that our souls were blacker than other people's. In any event we are guilty, we are guilty, guilty of what? I really don't know. I really don't know. In any case we knew it, because you had St Michael, there was a great devotion to St Michael, St Michael defeating the demon, defeating Satan who is a Black person; St Michael is handsome,

60 au regard du succès du *Dernier des Justes" Continents Manuscrits Génétique des textes littéraires,* no. 16 (2021), https://journals.openedition.org/coma/6092.

[19] TN: *Béké* is an Antillean Creole term designating white people of European origin.

> blond with his sword, and there's the Black demon, how... how... can you not...
>
> ***Identify with it***
>
> Identify with it, yes, how can you not identify with it, when every time someone called you Satan, called you a demon, we were called all those things… we mixed all that up." [20]

As part of a spiritual practice, Simone Schwarz-Bart's mother would pray every night for her loved ones who had died or were missing (for a long time, she did not receive any news from her husband who was in the army), prayers in which Simone had to participate raising her consciousness of their living presence.

Exposed to the French legitimate culture, Simone Schwarz-Bart was also exposed to the Creole culture. While her mother spent long hours tutoring her students, Simone was free to play with her classmates and to "Creolize" herself. Indeed, she learned how to speak Creole, spending time in the schoolyard and the nearby cemetery with her friends, whose social background and everyday reality were very different from hers. That way, she became very close to the people, immersed in the popular culture of Guadeloupe bearing witness to their economic destitution and social dramas but also attentive to their magical world, their dreams and the anonymous nobility of their souls (to whom she would literally give back their "lettres de noblesse" with her first novel *Pluie et Vent* with characters such as "Reines sans Nom", Télumé's grandmother):

> "Je les écoutais, avide, dans cette révélation innocente de ce qu'il se passait autour de moi, de crever la bulle dans laquelle j'évoluais, et d'avoir d'autres yeux. Mais surtout, j'entendais le créole, je le parlais."
>
> "I was listening, attentive to the innocent revelation of what was going on around me, to burst the bubble in which I lived, and to have other eyes. But above all, I heard and I spoke Creole."[21]

[20] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Hannah Hughes, July 2017.
[21] Plougastel and Schwarz-Bart, *Nous n'avons pas vu passer les jours,* 30.

Simone also learned folk tales and wisdom spending her vacation time with her paternal grandmother, who would teach her the knowledge of trees and nature, of the invisible world, a spiritual knowledge in the margins of the legitimate culture. Her grandmother was a black woman from Saint-Martin who had left her native island to work as a house maid in Guadeloupe. One of her white employers, the son of a wine merchant from Bordeaux who had inherited a wine business (Saint Emilion), had fallen in love with her and married her. This union had aroused opprobrium and public disgrace on both sides, a mix-blood union being very negatively perceived as a betrayal to the race and class structure of that time; he soon lost his business. Having bought a tiny island (îlet Brumant) in the Point-à-Pitre bay, they lived on a farm, raising cows. Her grandmother knew from her upbringing in Saint Martin how to produce butter that they would sell to white families. They had six children together. But the 1928 hurricane ruined the family again, so they then moved to their vacation home in Goyave. Simone and her mother would often visit them as her father worked away in the military (after World War II, he was sent to Congo, Lebanon, and Vietnam when he retired early and bought himself a house in Goyave). Simone recalls these moments fondly, remembering the love between her grandfather and grandmother had been a life-long lesson (her grandfather would not miss one day without saying "I love you" in three languages to his wife[22]):

> "C'est à ce moment-là que j'ai pris confiance en l'humanité, en voyant ce couple tellement harmonieux, en voyant le respect que mon grand-père portait à ma grand-mère, deux personnes totalement différentes"

[22] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Hannah Hughes, July 2017.

> "It's in that moment that I gained confidence in humanity, seeing such an harmonious couple, seeing the respect that my grandfather showed to my grandmother, two persons of a completely different backgrounds."[23]

From her grandfather, Simone Schwarz-Bart was exposed to a classic French culture. In the evening, he would read works of fiction and love novellas to his wife and asked her to comment on passages. From her grandmother, she experienced the wonders of Creole tales, which will become part of her poetic and aesthetic vision of life that will later transpire in her literature.

> "Nous attendions en grande ferveur la venue du soir, nous la gente enfantine car c'était le temps des contes, un temps hors temps, qui m'apportait un éclairage tamisé et indirect permettant de mieux décrypter une réalité fuyante, sans code annoncé. Par cette fenêtre, je pénétrais le monde fantastique de l'oralité, qui requiert une invention permanente, juste pour vous charmer un instant. Une parole gratuite peut modifier un individu pour toute sa vie, n'est-ce pas? Il se dégageait de ces soirées une atmosphère de magie qui auréolait de poésie le monde diurne : l'herbe devient la chevelure des défunts, les arbres ont une parole qu'il faut savoir écouter, les animaux peuvent avoir des secrets inconnus des humains…et quelquefois, nous comprenions en transparence notre histoire quand le héros se transforme en poisson pour traverser la rivière , en oiseau pour filer dans le ciel, et cependant conserve son identité au-delà des métamorphoses, demeure lui-même sous sa carapace de pierre, son enveloppe d'écaille ou de plumes. Ma grand-mère savait tout cela et plus encore, et elle prétendait avoir contact avec l'invisible."

> "We, the children, were waiting with great fervor the coming of the night as it was the time of storytelling, a time out of time, which brought me a subtle and indirect light, allowing me to better decipher a fleeting reality without preordained codes. Through this window, I entered in the fantastic world of orality, which requires a perpetual creativity, just to charm you for a second. A free word can change someone's life, right? A magical atmosphere came out of those nights, endowing the daytime with poetry : the grass becomes the hair of the deceased, the trees say a word that merits our listening, animals may have secrets unknown to the humans… and sometimes, we understood in transparency our history when the hero takes the shape of a fish to cross the creek, the shape of a bird to fly in the sky, and nevertheless preserves his identity beyond the metamorphosis, remains himself under his stone shell, his cover of scales or feathers. My grandmother knew all this and even more, and she pretended being in contact with the invisible world." [24]

2. Paris « Mecca » and the encounter with the Jewish world.

[23] Simone Schwarz-Bart. "Epouser quelqu'un hors de sa culture, ça dessille votre regard," Interview by Annick Cojean, *Le Monde*, oct. 11, 2020.
[24] Plougastel and Schwarz-Bart, *Nous n'avons pas vu passer les jours*, 30.

In 1958, Simone went with her mother to Paris, considered at the time as a sort of "Mecca" to attend her last year in high school at the "Lycée Jules Ferry" and to take her baccalauréat exam. Staying in the "metropole" was a necessary passage to leave the exiguity and smallness of the island, to expand one's perspective and to benefit from its symbolic prestige.[25] Crossing the Atlantic and reaching the European continent is only partly an inter-cultural experience, or inter-class or inter-race experience. Indeed, the generations of young people from the French Caribbean who came to study in Paris, starting after World War I in the 1920s, 1930s with Paulette Nardal, first person of color to study in the university of La Sorbonne in 1920, joined in 1923 by her sister Jeanne Nardal, followed by Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant etc. They were both heir and foreign to the French Parisian culture, the French bourgeois social class and to a certain extent the white race before coming to Paris. This experience troubles and defeats any of the traditional social categories used to describe a movement in between social classes used in French sociology. Indeed, the category of "transfuge de classe"[26] or "trans-class"[27] does not speak for the racial aspect or the breaking of the color line[28] in France. Simone

[25] Note that Fanon also uses a religious lexicon to speak of the symbolic power of the French cultural values and their effects on those who had staid in Metropole at that time : 'The Negro who knows the mother country is a demigod' (…) The black man who arrives in France changes because to him the country represents the tabernacle" See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 23. Fanon rightly explains that there is a similar binary opposition within France, between the city and the countryside, the capital, and the province. In the case of the Caribbean, such a phenomenon intensifies because of the racial hierarchies that the colonial experience created.
[26] Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Paris: Raisons d'agir, 2004). See also: Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1997). Annie Ernaux, *La Place* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983); Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims* (Paris: Fayard, 2009)*/ Returning to Reims*, trans. Michael Lucey (Los Angeles: Semiotext/ Foreign Agents, 2013)
[27] Chantal Jacquet, *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014).
[28] Term coined by the African American sociologist Frederick Douglass to refer to the racial segregation in the United States.

Schwarz-Bart, as did Maryse Condé and all their counterparts from Guadeloupe and Martinique, will nevertheless discovers the stigma of the skin color and the double standard that existed in continental France, as a citizen "of the second zone", even though they had fully embraced "their ancestors, the Gauls." Educated in the French system, Simone recalls the idyllic images that were associated with France as the motherland of human rights and the expectations to be welcomed and treated as equal. In Paris, she realized the asymmetrical relation, the gap between the illusions to be fully part of France and the harsh social reality the Caribbean community faced: discrimination in housing, complete ignorance of the exact location of Guadeloupe despite being part of France, racist use of the term "nègre", the discovery of one's Black body through the gaze of the other, what Fanon describes as a "third-person consciousness,"[29] and what Simone Schwarz-Bart describes here:

> "Mais voilà quand on arrivait ici on savait ce que cela voulait dire et quand on vous demandait si la Guadeloupe était prés de Madagascar, ou alors si la Guadeloupe était vers les Comores. Est-ce possible, ils ne nous connaissent donc pas « Oh mon Dieu » « comment est-ce possible nous leurs enfants. » Et là commençait la remontée du courant.
> […]
> C'est en venant ici qu'il y a eu le questionnement, parce que même là-bas, quand on vous appelle quand on vous disait « vieux nègre. » cela veut dire que vous êtes une personne, nègre cela veut dire personne pour nous mais ici [Paris] nègre c'est nègre cela a une autre connotation, et on le sent quand la personne que vous avez en face de vous vous le dit. Donc c'est là que vous vous rendez compte que « eh oui » ah quelle horreur. Des fois des enfants antillais qui étaient ici [à Paris], et qui allaient à l'école ici demandaient à leurs parents : « Pourquoi on n'est pas blanc ? » Pourquoi on est noir? La communauté antillaise ne pouvait pas faire le travail parce que pour eux il n'y avait pas lieu de le faire puisque nous étions des enfants de France. "
>
> "But there you are, when we got here, we knew what all that meant. And when they asked if Guadeloupe was close to Madagascar or if Guadeloupe was towards the Comoros and that sort of thing… "Is this possible, so they don't know us?" "Oh my God!" "How is this possible, us their children? " And so, that's where the seed was planted. […] It was coming here yes, it was by coming here that the questioning began. Because even over there, when you're called, when someone would say to you "old negro" it just means you're a person, a bad person, negro means anybody for us, it meant "person". But here negro, negro has another connotation, and you feel it when someone says it to your face. So that's when you realize that "oh yes, huh it's true, how awful! how awful!" This is why Antillean children who were born here, and who

[29] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White mask*s, 110.

> went to the school here asked their parents: "But why aren't we white? Why are we black?" There was a whole soul-searching, because the Antillean community at that time was not doing the work. They couldn't do the work because for them there was no point since we were France's children." [30]

In May 1959, having lost her *attestation* to take her test in Philosophy for the baccalauréat exam, Simone, on her way to the school administration, got lost in the subway. A young man, who addressed her in creole at the metro station Cardinal Lemoine (5th arrondissement) offered to help her. He recognized by her accent that she was from Guadeloupe. Taken aback, a White man speaking Creole, who knew where Guadeloupe was, she accepted his assistance to get her paperwork and afterward his invitation for a coffee with the little money he had. They sat talking and did not drink their coffee to converse until night. From there, started a long-lasting relationship in friendship, marriage and later in writing.

Without the intention of diminishing the beauty of this "unexpected" encounter that subverts the laws of social and racial homogamy of that time, the randomness of the encounter appears less than a mere coincidence (from a sociological point of view) when considering the commonalities they both share at the biographical level: a social trajectory in between French and its marginal cultures, in between languages, in between the living world and the ghostly presence of the dead. And what they share above all is an openness for creating bonds of friendship and love beyond class-based and racial prejudices. If Simone Schwarz-Bart already had in her own family a

[30] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Hannah Hughes, July 2017.

positive example of a mixed-race/class couple, she also made friends with a Jewish schoolmate in her Parisian high school.[31]

André Schwarz-Bart had already developed a strong interest in Caribbean culture and its language. In the early 1950s, he had established close bonds with the West Indian Community. Friend with writers such as Edouard Glissant from Martinique, Serge Patient from Guyana, he had attended the second Congress of Black Writers and artists in Rome in March 1959. His attraction for his "brothers of color" was rooted in a deep feeling of sympathy but also in a fraternal love that emerged from the shared history of enslavement.

Born in May 1928 in a Jewish family of Polish origin, he grew up in Metz, a city at the border with Germany. His father, Uszer Szwarcbart (1900-1942) came from a small town located in the center of Poland named Leczyca.[32] He had migrated to France in 1924. Educated in Hebrew and Yiddish in a Talmudic academy, an erudite religious scholar, he never really spoke French and made a modest living as a stallholder, selling stockings and socks in the markets, often with the help of André and his older brother. His mother, Luise Lubinsky, whose parents came from Lodz in Poland, was born in Zurich and grew up in Geneva, Switzerland before moving with her family to Eastern France. Luise met and married Uszer in 1925. André (Abraham

[31] See Nicole Lapierre, *Causes communes. Des juifs et des noirs* (Paris: Stock, 2011), 199. However, in other interviews she gave, Simone Schwarz-Bart states that her mother and herself only knew Jewish people through the bible, which implied that they would be unaware of the Shoah, which is a point that requires more clarification.

[32] The biographical information comes from Francine Kaufmann's articles: Francine Kaufmann, "André Schwarz-Bart, la lumière d'une étoile morte," *Les Temps Modernes*, no 641, 2006/7: 64-73; Francine Kaufmann, "André Schwarz-Bart, le juif de nulle part," *L'arche* 583 (dec. 2006). Francine Kaufmann, "La non-vocation d'André Schwarz-Bart. "Le fusil a fait pousser un cri d'homme à l'éléphant", ou l'écriture en réponse à l'évènement," *Continents Manuscrits Génétique des textes littéraires*, no. 10 (2018), https://journals.openedition.org/coma/1173.

Szwarcbart at birth) is the second child of this union, out of 8 children. When the Second World War broke out, the family was forced to evacuate to Western France and placed under house arrest. In Angoulême, André attended a vocational high school where he received a training as a fitter (*ouvrier ajusteur*). It is during this period, between 1942 and 1943, that half of his family was deported. His father, his mother and their newborn son and his great aunt were arrested as they did not have French citizenship. His older brother followed, having broken a curfew. None of them came back from Auschwitz. André worked on a farm to support his three other brothers. In 1943, the four remaining brothers were sent to another youth center in Paris as well as his sister to Louvecienne (a cover for a detention center). In September 1943, André joined the young communist league and the communist wing of resistance (Francs-tireurs et partisans-Main d'Oeuvre Immigrés, a very active group, mostly composed of different European nationalities (the majority of whom were Jewish). Thanks to his contact and support, he helped his brothers escape and hide at their maternal aunt's in Lyon, soon followed by his sister (whom he would later help to escape to the free zone). In May 1944, he was arrested for his Resistance activities in Limoges and tortured. He escaped in August 1944 and enlisted in the French regular army to participate in the liberation of France. In July 1945, back in Paris and living in a Jewish home, he awaited with hope for the return of his family from deportation. He had started to write (poems, notes, short stories). While living off multiple manual jobs (mechanic, miner, foundry laborer), he worked as a monitor in a Jewish orphanage (from 1946 to 1949) where his three brothers lived. After obtaining the baccalaureate exam as an external candidate in 1948, he started school at the

Sorbonne, but very soon quit as he felt ill at ease with the students of a bourgeois background. Preferring his jobs as a worker, he nevertheless kept close ties with the Jewish intellectual circles. The following year, he completed a certificate of philosophy and attended classes of the anthropologist Claude Levis-Strauss.[33] Deeply invested in intellectual research, he nevertheless remained faithful to the working-class community. Hence, his experience is not exactly that of a "trans-class" or "transfuge de classe." He seems to navigate different social circles, with a particular strong sense of self like his/her Caribbean fellows, as someone aware of the violence of the racial and social hierarchies but also able to critique and transgress them, thanks to a reflexive capacity that comes with his in-between condition.

With the anti-Semitic campaign occurring in the Soviet Union during what was called the "doctor plot" or "doctor-killers case" in 1952-53, André Schwarz-Bart distanced himself from the Communist party. Disappointed, he strengthened his ties with Jewish students who offered him a forum for his first publications in their journal: first a short-story, *La Fin de Marcus Libnitzki 1953* and then excerpts of his work-in-progress novel. Noticed by the press agent of the prestigious publishing house *Seuil,* the young writer signed his first contract with a publishing company. The day in May 1959, when he met Simone, he had just left the manuscript of *The Last of the Just* at the publishing house.

Through André and his world, Simone Schwarz-Bart was able to consider her own history and the history of her people under a new light. Hence, the narration of

[33] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Hannah Hughes, July 2017.

their unique encounter supersedes the myth of an individual love story. What retains our attention here in Simone Schwarz-Bart's account is that beyond the individual story and its geographical location, there is the shared experience of exile, deportation, mass violence, transcending the linear temporality of modern history. She explains:

> "Cet homme m'ouvrait le monde dans sa férocité et dans son merveilleux (…) Au fur et à mesure qu'il me parle de son monde anéanti, de sa richesse, de sa spiritualité, je vois apparaître le mien. Au fur et à mesure qu'il me fait entre dans son histoire, c'est la mienne qui frémit. La brûlure de la Shoah me renvoie à la brûlure de l'esclavage. Ses interrogations sur l'arrivés des déportés à Auschwitz ravivent mes obsessions sur les pensées du premier esclave ayant mis les pieds sur le sol de Guadeloupe. Et l'image des esseulés de l'Hôtel Lutétia, à Paris, scrutant, en 1945, les listes de convois et rescapés des camps me rappelle celle des miens cherchant à retracer d'où viennent leurs ancêtres africains, quelle tribu, quel pays, quel transport. "
>
> "This man opens up the world to me, in its ferocity and its marvellous (…) As he is telling me about his devastating world, of its wealth, of its spirituality, I see mine appearing. As he brings me into his history, it is mine that emerges. The burning pain of the Shoah reminds me of the burning pain of slavery. His questions regarding the arrival of deported men and women at Auschwitz revive my obsessions on what the first slave who set foot on the soil of Guadeloupe, was thinking. And the image of the lonely men and women of the Lutecia Hotel, in Paris, examining, in 1945, the lists of convoys and survivors remind me of the image of my people looking to trace their African ancestors and where they came from, which tribe, which country, which transportation."[34]

For Simone Schwarz-Bart, the encounter with André was the encounter of a new community. In contact with André's circle of friends, she met men and women, orphans, survivors of the genocide and deeply wounded by the war, immigrants from Germany, Poland or Romania.[35] She felt their sense of "disorientation"; she saw both their despair, their world haunted with the absolute event represented by Auschwitz, their intelligence, their creative effervescence, their thirst for culture and the intensity of their intellectual debates. Displaced, in exile or in the margins of French society, they were intellectuals of different fields. Some were part of the academic formal

[34] Simone Schwarz-Bart. "Epouser quelqu'un hors de sa culture, ça dessille votre regard," Interview by Annick Cojean, *Le Monde*, oct. 11, 2020.
[35] Lapierre, *Causes communes.* 199.

institutions (such as the scholar and specialist from English literature Richard Marienstras, and his anthropologist wife Elise Marienstras, the artist Emanuel Proweller, the ethnologist Isac Chiva). Others were in its margins such as Abrasza Zemsz, an erudite in Anthropology, close to Claude Levi-Strauss. He never made a formal career, but was a key interlocutor for André when this latter was working on the different versions of *Le dernier des Justes*.[36] Mostly secular (non-religious) Jews from Eastern Europe who had arrived in France in the aftermath of World War II, they all share in common (Simone included) what Enzo Traverso calls "the epistemological privilege of exile."[37] Elaborating Simmel's definition of the "foreigner" (Fremde) (opposed to a "mere traveler"), Traverso explains how the condition of exile, result of the tragic history of persecution and totalitarian violence, creates a figure of alterity that is able to confront his own culture to the culture of the host country. Through this constant shift of perspective, exiles are in a better position to adopt critical and nonconformist views outside the scope of norms and conventions.[38]

II. Sharing memory as a starting point for writing

When André Schwarz-Bart met his Caribbean friends, the word "slavery" came for him as an epiphany,[39] as it evoked an intimate and collective memory: the

[36] Lapierre, *Causes communes.* 199-201; Kathleen Gyssels, "Portrait of an Authentic Schnorrer: Abrasza Zemsz in Richard Marientras's Memory," *Journal of Jewish Identities*, 12, no. 2 (July 2019): 197-209.
[37] Enzo Traverso, *La pensée dispersée. Figures de l'exil judéo-allemand* (Paris: Editions Leo Sheer, 2004), 10.
[38] Enzo Traverso, *La pensée dispersée*, 11.
[39] Estelle Tarrica, "Jewish Mysticism and the Ethics of Decolonization in André Schwarz-Bart," *Yale French Studies* no. 118/119 (2010), 78.

last Passover Seder he spent with his family before the deportation of his parents and two brothers. As a central narrative in Jewish culture, the Exodus is indeed constantly reactivated in rituals. Each year on the evening of Pesach and each week during the Kiddush prayer to sanctify the Shabbat "in memory of the Exodus from Egypt." That night he had the "honor" to ask the traditional questions. As required by the ritual, his father in his answer recalled the story of their ancestors' flight from Egypt where they were kept enslaved under Pharoah. As explained by Delphine Horvilleur, the Exodus is considered not simply as a collective past event but also told as if it was constitutive of a personal history, an emancipation process that everyone should engage into "to free himself from his/her personal Egypt." "We did not exit Egypt, but we are exiting Egypt."[40] It is both a past and a present event, historical and mythical, mythical in its possibility of giving to a past event a new personal meaning in the light of the present. The reference to the experience of slavery, that André Schwarz-Bart sees as a repetition in the time of persecutions in Europe and under Hitler took a deep personal resonance when he encountered French Antilleans:

> "Je crois que c'est cet enfant juif dont les pères furent esclaves sous Pharaon, avant de le redevenir sous Hitler, qui se prit d'un amour fraternel et définitif pour les Antillais."
>
> "I think it is this Jewish child whose fathers were enslaved under Pharaoh, before being enslaved another time under Hitler, who came to feel a brotherly and definitive love for the Antilleans." [41]

The idea of writing a book on slavery dated back before the completion of his first novel (*The Last of the Just*) and his encounter and alliance with Simone. It came

[40] Delphine Horvilleur, *Comment les rabbins font les enfants. Sexe, transmission, identitée dans le Judaïsme* (Paris: Grasset, 2015), 147.
[41] André Schwarz-Bart, "Pourquoi j'ai écrit *la Mulâtresse Solitude.* André Schwarz-Bart s'explique sur huit ans de silence," *Le Figaro littéraire* 1084, (January 1967): 1 & 8-9.

to the writer from a conversation with a Caribbean friend in Paris in 1955. Confronted by the persistence of racism in her everyday life, she could not see any escape out of the oppressive situation and remained fatalistically certain of her fate that "in a hundred years, in a thousand years…a *negresse* will always remain a *negresse."*[42] André was unable to comfort her, only able to empathize that he too confronted to the same question having survived the Shoah and antisemitism. Taking her words seriously as he realized the deadlock she found herself in, the idea came to respond to her distress through a novel. At a moment when, especially a few years after World War II, there was a tendency to think of the Shoah in its unicity with the impossibility to compare it to any other event, André Schwarz-Bart was able, thanks to his compassion, to envision the heuristic value of a "transmemorial perspective"[43] or "multidirectional memory," helping him to consider "a new way of thinking about his own historical location."[44] Compassion is indeed the main component of his definition of a "Jewish" identity or a "Jewish" writer:

> "Pour moi être un écrivain juif cela signifie presque la même chose qu'être Juif (…) c'est d'abord participer à la vie des hommes, à leur souffrance, y adhérer intérieurement, […] essayer d'apporter une lumière dans cette obscurité, essayer d'entrevoir des possibilités de justice réelle, vivante."
>
> "To me, to be a Jewish writer means almost the same thing as being Jewish (…) It means to partake in the lives of human beings, to share their suffering, to feel their pain inwardly (…) to attempt to bring light where there is darkness, to attempt to glimpse the possibilities of real and living justice." [45]

---

[42] André Schwarz-Bart, "Pourquoi j'ai écrit *la Mulâtresse Solitude*," 1.
[43] Nicole Lapierre, *Causes communes. Des juifs et des noirs* (Paris: Stock, 2011).
[44] Michel Rothberg, "Anachronistic aesthetics: André Schwarz-Bart and Caryl Phillips on the ruins of memory," In *Multidirectional memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization.* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2009), 135-172.
[45] Interview in the French zionist journal,*La Terre Retrouvée,* in December 1959, quoted by Francine Kaufmann, "L'oeuvre juive et l'oeuvre noire d'André Schwarz-Bart," *Pardes* 44, no.1 (2008): 141.

It is interesting to note that André Schwarz-Bart does not define his "Jewishness" from any identity characteristic but through a universal perspective ("to partake in the lives of human beings, to share their suffering"). In that sense, he is very close to Aimé Césaire's conception of "negritude" linked to a universal experience of pain and suffering.[46]André however adds a subjective component: the idea of compassion, which does not consist of an abstract position of solidarity but entails

[46] Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1939)*/ Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001). Here is a relevant excerpt:

"Partir.
Comme il y a des hommes-hyènes et des hommes-panthères, je serai un homme-juif
Un homme-cafre
Un homme-hindou-de-Calcutta
Un homme-de-Harlem-qui-ne-vote-pas

L'homme-famine, l'homme-insulte, l'homme-torture
On pouvait à n'importe quel moment le saisir et le rouer
de coups, le tuer-parfaitement le tuer-sans avoir de compte à rendre à personne sans avoir d'excuses à présenter à personne
un homme-juif
Un homme-pogrom.
Un chiot
Un mendigot"

"To go away.
As there are hyena-men and panther-men, I would be a jew-man
a kaffir-man
a Hindu-man-from-Calcutta
a Harlem-man-who-doesn't-vote
the Famine-man, the insult-man,
the torture man you can grab anytime, beat-up, kill ---
no joke, kill --- without having to account to anyone,
witout having to make excuse to anyone
a jew-man
a pogrom-man
a puppy
a beggar

participating in the suffering of others emotionally and psychologically, which brings him closer to women writers in his relation to writing.[47]

For the Caribbean, slavery is also the founding rupture from which a new society emerged. A fictional narrative was, however, for a long time absent. Indeed, this past had been silenced – erased from the collective memory and for a long time absent from the curriculum of history books at school, while being however "obsessively present,"[48] as an open wound. When Simone encountered André, she realized the existing voids or the gaps that had been engulfed in the Middle Passage and the assimilation process to the French nation. She started to consider exploring the memory of her people lost in the colonial "abyss". Encountering André and with him the European Jews' history opened new perspectives on her own historical trajectory and the way history was apprehended by her people of Guadeloupe:

> "L'histoire juive m'a renvoyé à la mienne. Pourquoi ? Parce que cette Histoire c'est l'Histoire de la mémoire transmise, transmise d'enfants en enfants, transmise de génération en génération, alors que chez moi je sentais que au contraire c'était la culture de l'Oubli. L'esclavage il ne fallait pas en parler, on occultait complétement cette période à l'époque, c'était comme si nous étions issus brusquement de cette terre de Guadeloupe, que nous avions toujours habité là, que nous n'étions pas arrachés à une terre. La traite négrière n'était pas du tout de mise à cette époque. On cachait comme si c'était à nous d'avoir honte, et que c'était à nous de couvrir les immondices, de détourner la tête, et [on ne les considérait pas comme] des événements, des catastrophes telles qu'il faut en prendre toute l'importance, aider ceux qui ont subi le choc à sortir, à se reconstruire, à se relever."
>
> "I saw in Jewish history my own through reflection. Why? Because this History, it is the History of a memory, communicated, relayed from children to children, passed down through generations, whereas in my country I felt it was the contrary, it was the culture of oblivion. Slavery, it was a forbidden topic, we used to completely hide this period, it was as if we suddenly came out of this land of Guadeloupe, that we always lived here, that we had not been deported from somewhere. The slave trade was silenced at that time. We hid this past as if it was on us to be ashamed of it, and as if it was our responsibility to cover up the trash, to close

[47] If his first novel, *The Last of the Just* (1959), is a novel written in the perspective of the third person, the second novel André Schwarz-Bart wrote in collaboration with Simone, *Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (1967) is from the point of view of an old Caribbean old woman, a first-person narrative.

[48] Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse, Selected essays,* Trans.Michael Dash (University of Virginia Press: 1999), 64.

> our eyes. [It was not considered] as events, catastrophes in all their importance to help those who suffered the damage to overcome, to rebuild, to stand back up."[49]

In the hexagonal territory of France, the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade which fed a servile workforce and the wealth of European societies for three centuries and a half, has been obliterated from the national collective narrative which insisted rather on a more glorious and united representation of a nation born at the moment of its abolition in 1848. This silencing was easier to enforce since the traces were outside of its own continental territory. Instead, colonial ideology spread its own dominant version of history through the school system and the assimilation narrative, imposing a culture of oblivion, or what Edouard Glissant calls "la mémoire collective raturée" (an erased collective memory). Why was there such an erasure?

When slavery was abolished for a second time in 1848, while slave owners were compensated for losses in property (mainly in slaves), the nearly 250 000 slaves in the colony were to be thankful for their liberation, and grateful for being granted the status of a French citizen. Swayed by Victor Schoelscher's republicanism, the mulatto elite in Guadeloupe and Martinique, in the process of constituting a political oppositional force, promoted embracing French citizenship, the epitome of the emancipation process, under the compromise of erasing the past. This "therapy of forgetting" worked as a miraculous cure to wipe out the dark stains of slavery and to bury the traces of the accumulated resentment toward a system of exploitation in

[49] Simone Schwarz-Bart, "Simone et André Schwarz-Bart, la mémoire en partage," interview by Camille Clavel, 2018, video, 52:00.

complete contradiction with the universalist principles of the Declaration of Human Rights that France claimed to champion.[50]

In its core principles, the Republic sought to unify any individual differences and historical particularities under the promise of creating a new society in which each member is guaranteed to be fully recognized. Immediately after the abolition, different emerging political figures, such as Cyrille Bissette, publicly declared the merits of "throwing a veil over the past" and concealing any feeling of resentment in order to achieve a political and social fusion to the French family: "slavery must be forgotten: "Friends, let us not dwell in the past (…) Let us master all resentment so that the age of liberty is solidly constituted and inalterably founded." Forgetting slavery meant a total rallying to the French motto: "liberty, equality, fraternity". It meant also condemning any cultural practices reminding its dreadful past; specific practices such as the carnival or any other customs from the slave culture had to be erased.[51] Under the third Republic, assimilation and an imposed amnesia took over and reached its culminating point in 1914 when Martinique and Guadeloupe paid the tax of blood, by sending soldiers to fight during World War I. And since 1946 when Guadeloupe and Martinique became French overseas departments, the theme of assimilation persisted to cover the history of slavery up to nowadays and produce "the mechanism of forgetting."[52]

---

[50] Myriam Cottias, " 'Forgetting the past' for 'citizenship': Barter and resentment in Martinique (1848-1946)," trans. Lysa Hochroth *New Contrée* 42 (1997): 160.
[51] Cottias, " 'Forgetting the past' for 'citizenship'," 161.
[52] René Belenus, "Les Antilles françaises enchaînées à l'esclavage ; Un passé qui ne passe pas," interview by Stéphane Bonnefoi and Diphy Mariani, *LSD La série documentaire*, France Culture, May 8, 2019, audio, 52 :00. Belenus explains, "Assimilation cela veut dire que nous sommes français depuis 300 ans, nous avons droit à la reconnaissance, il faut devenir des départements français comme n'importe quel département de métropole et il faut donner des gages d'amour à la mère patrie. Et on ne peut pas demander

The colonizer, comforted in a colonial narrative of superiority, was spared the work and responsibility of reassessing the past and undertaking a reparation process, as the burden of shame fell on to the victims. Only in 2001 was the slave trade recognized as a crime against humanity with the Taubira Law, and only in 2006 did the French government established a national day (May 10) to remember the slave trade, slavery and their abolition.[53]

In Guadeloupe and Martinique, the access to French citizenship, perceived as an act of liberation, also became a factor of alienation. The stifled/muted memory of slavery would be insidiously transmitted through fantasy and as reflected in games played by children mentioned in Simone's testimony[54] and Maryse Condé autobiography[55]. Suzanne Césaire in her essay "The malaise of a civilization" explains in detail the negative and unconscious consequences of the "disastrous confusion that

---

à la fois la reconnaissance et lui parler des tâches sombres comme l'esclavage. Et ça va en continu cette affaire-là, parce qu'en 1998, on commémore le 150ème de l'abolition de l'esclavage, Mr Jospin, quel est le slogan qu'il choisit : "tous né en 1848" C'est une insulte, nous on l'a très mal vécu. Tous nés en 1848 ? ça veut dire ne retenons que le geste de la 2ndе république qui abolit et oublions les 200 ans d'esclavage qui ont eu lieu avant. Or c'est exactement ce qui se passe. Aujourd'hui on ne parle que d'abolition, on ne parle que de commémoration. Personne ne parle de l'esclavage.

"Assimilation means that "we are French since 300 years ago, we have a right to be recognized as such, we have to become French departments as any other department of the metropole and we have to show proof of love to the motherland. And one can't ask both recognition and talk about the dark moments like slavery. And this business goes on and on, because in 1998, we celebrate the 150th birthday of the abolition of slavery, what is the slogan that Mr. Jospin: 'we are all born in 1848.' It is an insult, it was painful for us. We are all born in 1848 means that we only remember the symbolic moment of the 2nd Republic when they decided to abolish, and we forget the 200 years of slavery before. Yet, it is exactly what happened. Today, we only talk about abolition, we only talk about celebration. Nobody talks about slavery."

[53] On the topic of slavery in the French political debate, see also: Françoise Vergès, *La mémoire enchainée. Questions sur l'esclavage.* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006).

[54] She mentions that growing up, when children used to play "hide and seek", the one who was caught was asked to kneel and say "my apology master" to be freed. (Schwarz-Bart, Simone. Interview by Martin Quenehen, *A voix nue,* France Culture, Oct. 16-20, 2017. Audio, 2:19:51. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFMq5tRaKBs.)

[55] Maryse, Condé. "Leçon d'histoire," in *Le Coeur à rire et à pleurer; contes vrais de mon enfance,* 39-44.

came with equating emancipation with assimilation", creating a state of "pseudo-civilization that can be qualified as abnormal or terratic."[56] The poets and novelists were the first to commit to the archival work that official historians had neglected. André and Simone Schwarz-Bart undertook the project together.

2. Coming to writing

> "C'est vrai que l'écriture personnelle ne serait certainement pas venue si je n'avais pas eu cette espèce d'encouragement. Je n'avais pas suffisamment confiance en moi. Je n'avais pas suffisamment confiance en mon peuple et en mon histoire pour prendre la plume et écrire sur nous. La littérature, c'est un peu un miroir dans lequel le peuple se regarde, c'est aussi l'image qu'il veut donner de lui. Donc, je ne pensais pas pouvoir m'engager de la sorte. "
>
> "It is true that personal writing would certainly not have come if I did not have this sort of encouragement. I did not have enough confidence in myself. I did not have enough confidence in my people and in my history to put pen to paper and write on us. Literature is sort of a mirror in which the people look at themselves, it is also the image that oneself wants to give. So, I did not think I was able to undertake such a project." [57]

Like Maryse Condé, writing for Simone Schwarz-Bart came with a certain shyness, an effort to gain self-confidence, but also as something that was at first unconceivable. She insists on the importance of being encouraged and supported by the surrounding environment, in this case her husband. But what could appear as an individual shyness is also rooted in the broader social and historical context. And writing was considered outside the realm of the possible for this generation of women because it constitutes a transgressive act at multiple levels: first of a bourgeois culture,

[56] Suzanne Césaire, "Malaise of a civilization," in *The Great Camouflage, Writings of Dissent* (1941-1945), ed. Daniel Maximin, trans. Keith L. Walker, 28-33. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012.
[57] Simone Schwarz-Bart, interview by Martin Quenehen.

literature equating to the canon taught at school, ending with the 19th century and with mainly authors of European white male authors as part of the curriculum:

> "Bien entendu j'en avais envie d'écrire] mais je n'osais pas. Pour moi, un écrivain c'était quelqu'un que je n'aurais pas pu être dans tous les cas. Il faut penser qu'à l'époque quand on étudiait la littérature en philo, en première …cela s'arrêtait au 19ème siècle, à Chateaubriand et à tous ces auteurs romantiques…Le programme littéraire s'arrêtait à cela, donc nous n'avions aucun auteur contemporain à étudier et encore moins un auteur antillais. Donc cela n'était pas du tout à l'ordre du jour. Voilà pourquoi, moi je pensais à Musset, je pensais à Victor Hugo, je connaissais par cœur des tirades de Lamartine …mais je ne me voyais pas. Je ne pouvais pas moi m'imaginer écrivant. "
>
> "Of course, I wanted to write but I did not dare doing so. For me, a writer was someone that I could not be in any case. One must think that at that time when one studied literature in the philosophy section …the program stopped at the 19th century, with Chateaubriand and all those romantic authors… The curriculum in literature stopped there, so we did not have any contemporary writers to study, and even less so a Caribbean writer. It was not on the agenda. That's why, in my case, I would think of Musset, I would think of Victor Hugo, I knew by heart lines of Lamartine's poems… but I could not see myself, I could not picture myself writing." [58]

Illegitimate as a writer, it is also the topic of writing that appears illegitimate and questioned, with concerns regarding the audience. Self-confidence, as mentioned earlier, does not only concern the self but also the collective history and experience that would be worth telling, worth of literary value.

> " (…) A ce moment-là j'ai commencé à écrire. Mais je lui disais : " Mais André, notre réalité était-elle littérairement transmissible ? Ce que nous vivons, nous antillais, notre vie, notre ressenti, qui cela va-t-il intéresser ?"
>
> "(…) At this point, I started to write. But I would tell him : « But André, can we communicate our reality through literature? Who is going to be interested in what we, Antilleans, are living, our experience, our feelings?" [59]

In this shift of perspective (of who can tell the story and what kind of story can be told), André played an essential role. He himself claimed to have become a writer not

[58] Simone Schwarz-Bart, " 5 questions pour ile en ile" Interview by Thomas Spears, 20 & 29 July 2010. Audio, 68:00. http://ile-en-ile.org/simone-schwarz-bart-5-questions-pour-ile-en-ile/.
[59] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Thomas Spears.

by vocation but through the violence of the event.[60] As Francine Kaufmann showed, when he won the Goncourt Prize in 1959, the media coverage of the time liked to portray his trajectory as the astounding story of a prodigy writer. [61] However, a closer look to his trajectory showed that he had already started to write (notes, short stories, poems) at the end of the war. When he resumed his education, he would go to the library on a regular basis. Reading of *Crime and Punishment* in 1946 proved a revelation, the discovery of a medium that can best express one's interiority. He then became an assiduous reader of all the European classics (Balzac, Cervantès, Stendhal, Shakespeare, Tolstoï, Pascal, Proust, Bernanos) and the Bible, although he had lost his religious faith in God with the loss of his parents and his loved ones during World War II. If he distanced himself from the students who generally came from privileged families, André Schwarz-Bart did not pursue formal university education but he continued to have close ties with intellectual circles in Paris. He worked for many years and long hours to achieve what will become his first masterpiece. Yiddish was his native language, he only learned French at school. As the war interrupted his education, he later studied as an autodidact to write in French. For his first novel, he invested tremendous efforts to not only research the history of his people but also work on the aesthetic form of his text. He demonstrates a very high self-consciousness of the linguistic gap between the oral form of language and the written language:

> "Jusque-là, j'avais si rarement entendu parler un français correct, et en écrivant, rien ne m'était plus difficile que de passer du langage populaire parlé à ce que je croyais le bon langage écrit. La trouvaille d'un adjectif juste m'était une victoire, et j'ai détruit des milliers de feuillets parce que je n'arrivais pas à m'assimiler la syntaxe de la langue écrite. Je préfère oublier ce

[60] He quotes a Bantu proverb to introduce his speech when he received the Jérusalem prize on March 30, 1967: "Le fusil a fait pousser un cri d'homme à l'éléphant"/"the riffle made the elephant scream as a human being."
[61] Kaufmann, "La non-vocation d'André Schwarz-Bart," 3.

> que j'ai négligé de détruire. J'étais tourmenté par le fossé qui s'est élargi de nos jours entre la langue parlée et ce que j'appelais le « langage de la bourgeoisie."
>
> "Until then, I had so rarely heard a correct French, and in writing, nothing was more difficult to go from spoken popular language to what I thought was the correct written language. Finding a correct adjective was a victory, and I destroyed thousands of notes because I could not get used to the syntax of the written language. I prefer to forget what I have neglected to throw away. I was tormented with the gap that has recently increased between the spoken language and what I called "the language of the bourgeoisie." [62]

Well-aware of the requirements in the editorial world and a certain aesthetic form with regards to what he calls the "bourgeois" language, and as such the "bourgeois" rules of the game in the literary field, he would later be able to immediately recognize Simone's literary talent at once as a "true" writer when he was finalizing his first novel on the Caribbean. In 1962, working on the manuscript of the first volume of the series "La Mulâtresse Solitude", he cloistered himself away in Paris and he wrote a letter to his wife who had remained in Guadeloupe. He asked her to refresh his memory regarding a scene they had witnessed between two young boys during an electoral meeting. He wanted to transpose the argument that had caught their attention into the novel. The text he received from his wife came as an illumination:

> "Not only had she found a translucent, silken equivalent for each one of the turns of phrase and expressions of the Creole language, but also, without knowing it, her imagination had interpreted, transformed, added all those little details by which one recognizes a true writer. I was overwhelmed. I held in my hands the very substance I was vainly seeking, and which had been forbidden to me. All that I had loved in West Indians for ten years, all the colors and all the perfumes were to be found there in this text whose modesty was all the more moving as it claimed only to revive my memory"[63] [Translation Ronnie Scharfman]

[62] Interview in the *Bulletin de l'éducation nationale,* December 17, 1959.
[63] André Schwarz-Bart, "Pourquoi j'ai écrit *la Mulâtresse Solitude*." Quoted by Ronnie Scharfman, in "Significantly Others," *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 214.

Outsider himself, working within but also beyond the conventional borders of the literary field, André would have no problem seeing in his wife the status and legitimacy of a great artist regardless of her educational background, her gender, or race, whereas Simone, for a moment, considered herself his "assistant". She conceded with reluctance to write her name next to his for their first collaborative novel *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*[64] in 1967. She sees her contribution as "minor", which we can interpret as another manifestation of her shyness, although she was for him the "spark" that could allow him to finalize the project, "his perfume" or the "authentic" voice that he could not find.[65] The discovery of Simone' literary talent, recollected with emotion by her husband, demonstrates a coming to writing with ease. She had indeed acquired literacy in French through her family and education at an early age, contrary to his painful relation to the French written language, partly because of his delayed education in the French language. However, she also on her side devoted long hours of work to perfect certain professional qualities. Together, as a young married couple (1961), they lived in Dakar, Senegal for a year and a half where she pursued literary studies at the University of Dakar. Their first son was born there. It is also in

[64] The novel has not been translated in English but can literally translate as "A dish of pork with green bananas".

[65] André Schwarz-Bart was himself highly concerned with his own legitimacy to write on the Caribbean as a nonnative from the Caribbean. He would not have carried such project to write on the history of a people different than his own, had not he been granted the endorsement of the representant of this community. That's why before undertaking any research, he made the point to go to the Parisian publishing house Presence Africaine in order to meet with the founding fathers of the negritude movement. Alioune Diop and the poet in exile from Madagascar, Jacques Rabemananjara, received his project with a warm welcome, so did Aimé Césaire in Martinique. It is important to note "authenticity" does not designate something concrete or graspable. It is evoked though the poetic expression "the colors and perfume" designating mysterious part of the Caribbean soul or in Edouard Glissant's term an "opacity." In the Judaic tradition and many other spiritual traditions, the perfume is considered a medium of communication with the divine, a metaphor of the passage from the material to the spiritual world.

Senegal that Simone Schwarz-Bart will realize the beauty and historical experience of her native Caribbean islands, which had inherited but was not limited to its African component.

They will then spend ten years in Lausanne, Switzerland, before settling down in Goyave, Guadeloupe. She continued to attend a few classes in literature at the University in Switzerland as an external candidate. But soon after, André encouraged her to follow other less conventional ways to train and acquire reading and writing skills to apply in her own writing. He introduced her to literary models outside the French canon: Russian writers, such as Anton Chekov, who became a model for her to write short stories, and Yiddish writers, such as Cholem Aleichem, Isaac Bashevis Singer, or Isaac Babel. It is also through André that she had access to the prestigious publishing house, *Le Seuil*, to publish her first solo novel in 1972 and all the subsequent ones. In short, André Schwarz-Bart helped Simone acquire and improve the cultural resources necessary to publish and the social resources to access the French literary field and to overcome the symbolic obstacles that prevented her initially to envision writing as a legitimate activity, because of the gender and racial hierarchies prevalent at the time.

3. Half-tone reception of the first novel and ambivalent position in the literary field: a gender effect?

October 1st, 1972 came out Simone Schwarz-Bart's first novel, *Pluies et Vents sur Télumée Miracle* (*The bridge of beyond*). The novel received a wide acclaim. In France, it won the "Grand Prix des lectrices *Elle*" in 1973, and it was the first time that

a national French prize was awarded to a Black woman writer from the Caribbean. Although national, this prize remains within the confines of feminine literature. Indeed, the jury of this prize is constituted by the readers of the feminine magazine *Elle,* who are mainly women "who love to read." It honors the work of fiction of young authors, women represent more that 50% of the laureates since 1970, it aims at "Grand Prix des lectrices *Elle*" whereas women authors have difficulties to receive the symbolic recognition of the highest prizes in France, such as the Goncourt Prize and the Femina Prize. Her first and second novel (*Ti Jean L'horizon* 1979) were, according to the author, among the finalists of the Goncourt Prize but did not win, mainly because "she did not have a country", a comment that speaks of the negative and violent representation of Guadeloupe and the overseas territories within the national French territory.

> ***Après, comment vous avez pu avoir accès à la publication, comment cela s'est passé pour Télumée ?***
> Ça s'est très bien passé, j'étais sur la liste du prix Goncourt, chaque fois que j'ai publié, j'étais sur la liste, jusqu'à la fin, jusqu'au deux derniers chaque fois il m'a été dit: « Mme Schwarz-Bart vous n'avez pas de pays . »
>
> ***Comment vous expliquez que pour la question des prix, que vous soyez passée si prés …***
> Il n'y a aucune explication, je n'en sais rien, et vraiment peut-être que c'est une grande chance que je n'ai pas eu le prix parce que… en fait je n'en ressens absolument pas la nécessité, ni le besoin, ni le manque ou quoi que se soit. Pour moi la nécessité est avant tout d'écrire, de publier, de pouvoir publier et de pouvoir continuer à écrire. C'est en cela le plus grand prix, le prix d'écriture, voilà.

> ***Afterwards, how were you able to get published, how did that go for* Télumée*?***
>
> It went very well, I was able to compete for the Prix Goncourt every time I published, I was competitive, up to the end, up until the last two chapters every time I've been told: "Mrs. Schwarz-Bart you don't have a country."
>
> ***How do you explain the issue with the awards, that you have come so close…***
>
> There's no explanation, I don't know, and really maybe it's a great blessing that I never got an award because… in fact, I don't feel the necessity at all, or the need, or the lack or anything. For me, what is necessary above all is to write, to publish, to be able to publish and to be able

to continue to write. That is in itself the greatest award, the award of writing.[66]

Among the Guadeloupean public and in intellectual circles, the reception was mixed. According to Fanny Margras,[67] in spite of the laudatory reception in the local press, and the positive reception by the people of Guadeloupe, the novel was subject to some polemical attacks in a public gathering organized in 1973. Simone was questioned in her legitimacy as a woman writer for some aesthetic resemblance with her husband's novel. In this period when French Caribbean literature was still emerging, the original style of Simone was also perceived as "exotic" and imitating a French literary style. In the early 1980s, the author would also have been attacked for not using creole and hence not serving the cause of independence.

Twenty years after its release, however, the Créolistes praised its aesthetic and paid tribute to its innovative form as groundbreaking for Caribbean literature.[68] Maryse Condé, as a critic, who had also initially perceived the novel through the lens of exoticism[69], revised her opinion. In a more in-depth study of the novel in her pioneering critical essay *La parole des femmes*,[70] she contributed to its introduction to the larger academic circles. Acclaimed for introducing a female voice, the novel received attention for expressing the Creole rural and oral traditions and the Creole

[66] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Hannah Hughes, July 2017.
[67] See Fanny Margras, "Pluies et vents sur Solitude, Etude de la réception des oeuvres d'André et Simone Schwarz-Bart en Guadeloupe en 1972," *Continents Manuscrits Génétique des textes littéraires,* no. 16 (2021) https://journals.openedition.org/coma/6625
[68] Patrick Chamoiseau et Raphael Confiant, *Lettres creoles,* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).
[69] Maryse Condé, "Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle," *Présence africaine* 83 (1992): 138-139. On Maryse Condé's first review within the political and literary context of the time, see also : Xavier Luce and Fanny Margras "Schwarz-Bart et Condé, du pays natal retrouver le fumet…" *Continents Manuscrits Génétique des textes littéraires,* no. 16 (2021) https://journals.openedition.org/coma/6590.
[70] Maryse Condé, *La parole des femmes. Essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française* (Paris: L'harmattan, 1979).

identity, for preserving the memory and history of the Caribbean;[71] critics have read the novel as a way for preserving the memory and history of the Caribbean, for expressing female subjectivity and introspection,[72] for resisting to the ontological dislocation of the Caribbean people through the violent history of slavery.[73] And, if the realist aspects of the story have been considered for their political significance as uncovering colonial oppression,[74] the legendary elements, the spirituality and popular wisdom are generally viewed for only expressing old traditions and recreating a myth (in the sense of an idealized image frozen in time). In addition, the novel and its author have been criticized for being politically disengaged, its main character Télumée being portrayed as a passive victim of slavery,[75] resilient, and ending her life with joy in her garden, expressing hope and optimism that can appear unrealistic or just a gesture of encouragement. In the following section, I emphasize the political significance of Simone Schwarz-Bart novel's mythic or more precisely mystical aspects, by offering a decolonial reading.

The literary field is a relational system that produces an unequal distribution of symbolic profits and marginalization. Simone Schwarz-Bart's relative marginal

---

[71] See the seminal work of Kathleen Gyssels, *Le folklore et la littérature créole dans l'oeuvre de Simone Schwarz-Bart* (Bruxelles: Académie des Sciences d'Outre-mer, 1995); *Filles de Solitudes. Essai sur l'identité antillaise dans les (auto-) biographies fictives de Simone et André Schwarz-Bart.* (Paris: L'harmattan, 1996). See also Fanta Toureh, *L'imaginaire dans l'oeuvre de Simone Schwarz-Bart. Approche d'une mythologie antillaise* (Paris:L'harmattan, 1997).
[72] Ronnie Scharfman, "Mirroring and mothering in Simone Schwarz-Bart's Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle and Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea," *Yale French Studies,* no.62 (1981): 88-106.
[73] Natalie Melas, "Catastrophic miniaturization in Aimé Césaire and Simone Schwarz-Bart," in *All the difference in the world* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2006).
[74] Maryse Condé, *La parole des femmes*; Renée Larrier, *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean,* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida): 66-67.
[75] Jones Bridget, Introduction. The Bridge of Beyond. By Simone Schwarz-Bart. Trans. Barbara Bray. London: Heinmann, 1982. iv-xviii.

position in French and Guadeloupe, rooted in a gender and racial bias, can also be seen as an advantage in the long run. We will consider how her initial marginalized position in the literary field can turn into a precursor position for its decolonial dimension, renewing the position of the "engaged" writer.

III. A decolonial reading of *The Bridge of Beyond* in the light of *The Last of the Just*

In the remaining section of this chapter, I will further my analysis of Simone and André Schwarz-Bart's collaborative writing by examining their first literary works. Looking at Simone's relationship to writing inscribed in her own relationship with André in life and in literature, opened me to a new way to interpret her novel in relation to André's first novel. In fact, Simone Schwarz-Bart herself gave a key for this interpretation claiming, when asked about her first novel, that Télumée and the generations of women she descends from are "the Justs within her."[76] It encouraged me to reconsider Télumée as a reflection of Ernie, the last of a generation of Just and to contemplate a particular ethical vision of life inherited from past generations. It renews the meaning of Télumée's courage that literary critics have already praised, a resistance to colonial oppression but grounded in a particular holy vision of life that does not appear immediately. Indeed, *The Bridge of Beyond* does not refer directly to sacred scriptures and its mystical tone is generally expressed in a secular language or what one would see as "popular wisdom" or metaphysical reflections, which can then

[76] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Camille Clavel.

be considered as less "sacred." Télumée is, through the exalted poetic language of Simone Schwarz-Bart, elevated to the rank of a Just woman as is Ernie for their stories are exemplary of the greatness of a whole generation of people, who are oftentimes seen as victims of the harsh time of persecution, slavery and its aftermath. By telling the story of these characters in both a realist and mythic language and to aestheticize their nobility, without explicit political discourse, I contend that it is a subversive and decolonial vision which Simone and André Schwarz-Bart provide, as it questions the borders between a living younger generation and their ancestors. It calls for a positive representation of ancestral, religious, and traditional values and their significance with a broader implication for today. It is hence decolonial, in the sense that it takes into account the knowledge, wisdom and spirituality of those who have experienced the violence of exile and deportation and have been up to now silenced or sidelined.[77] It purports a particular ethical vision beyond the social, gender and racial categories imposed by a colonial history.[78] And, to my mind, it is in this ethical vision that there resides a precursory political significance, as it can speak to us universally today, not just as particular tales for the Caribbean or Jewish community.

---

[77] The Decolonial Epistemology Movement started with the work of South American authors such as Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Enrique Dussel. They commit, like Subaltern and Postcolonial Studies, to an intellectual project of criticism and resistance to Western modernity, colonialism and colonial/capitalist global mode of exploitation. Without rejecting European critical thinking traditions, they differ from Postcolonial Studies by insisting on taking into account the epistemic diversity of the world. They claim Non-Western epistemologies as essential to the transformation of colonial forms of knowledge and being, and the formation of a "transmodernity." For more, see Enrique, Dussel, *Critica del "Mito de la Modernidad". En 1492. El encubrimiento del otro. Hacia el origen del "Mito de la Modernidad"*, La Paz-Bolivia: Plural Editores. (1994). Walter, Mignolo, *Local Histories, Global Design. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*, Princeton : Princeton University Press (2000); Ramon Grosfoguel, "La descolonización de la economía-política y los estudios poscoloniales : transmodernidad, pensamiento fronterizo y colonialidad global," *Tabula Rasa*, nº 4 (2006): 17-48, https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39600402.

[78] Regarding the categories of gender and race from a decolonial perspective, see Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism, " *Hypathia* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 742-759.

This comparative approach of Simone and André Schwarz-Bart's first novels confirms the reversibility of their work that critics have already shown.[79] However, if Télumée Miracle can be seen as the last of a lineage of Just women, *The Bridge of Beyond* is not a copy, an imitation, or an equivalent of *The Last of the Just* in the Caribbean. It came to existence more as an echo: an echo in relation to writing, writing in the burning wounds of the history of slavery, while carrying its unique "colors and perfumes."[80] The following reflection is only the first glimpse, the opening of a door or an invitation for more contemplative and comparative interpretation.

1. Living memory and storytelling as decolonial praxis

The Last of the Just is the account of more than seven hundred years of antisemitism in Europe, from the 12th century until the Shoah. It recounts the story of a family of "Just men", the Levy, all descendants of Rabbi Yom Tom Levy, martyr of York, England in 1185. Each generation of the Levy engender a "Just man", which, according to a Yiddish legend belongs to the "36 Just men" on which the world rests.[81] In the novel, "the Just men," whether they know it or not, take on the pain and

[79] See Kathleen Gyssels, *Marrannes et Marronnes: la co-écriture reversible d'André et Simone Schwarz-Bart* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2015). See also Francine Kaufmann, "Le projet judéo-noir d'André Schwarz-Bart: saga reversible," *Présence francophone. Revue International de langue et de littérature* 79, no.1 (2012): 15-38, https://crossworks.holycross.edu/pf/vol79/iss1/6/.

[80] André Schwarz-Bart, "Pourquoi j'ai écrit *la Mulâtresse Solitude.* André Schwarz-Bart s'explique sur huit ans de silence," *Le Figaro littéraire* 1084, (January 1967): 1 & 8-9. I would also note that the quality of "authenticity" that André Schwarz-Bart describes in Simone's text does not designate something concrete or graspable. Instead, the poetic expression "the colors and perfumes" represents the mysterious part of what constitute a particular people and culture, their souls or in Glissant's term their "opacity". In the Judaic tradition and many other spiritual traditions, the perfume is considered a medium of communication with the divine, a metaphor of the passage from the material to the spiritual world.

[81] Gershom Scholem, "The Tradition of the Thirty-Six Hidden Just Men," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schoken, 1995), 251-256.

suffering of the world, for if one went missing all mankind would cease to exist. Each generation of Levy experiences antisemitism and persecution until the last one, Ernie, who is murdered with his people in the gas chamber of Auschwitz.

In her essay on Jewish memory, Fleur Kuhn Kennedy shows that memory is central to traditional Jewish culture.[82] Since the 19th century, in an increasingly secularized Western world, literature became the place where the desacralized Jewish memory continued to exist, following, and countering the abrupt course of historical events. It is precisely the experience of violence that spurs the need to preserve traces of the past and to make sense of it. History enters the novel under the sign of death.[83] But André wrote the *Last of the Just* to not only remember the catastrophic event of the Shoah, but to reinstate the dignity of an entire people (90% of the Jews in Poland were exterminated)[84] and along with the massacre, the disappearance of the Yiddish language and culture. It is not only a tribute to the six million Jews whose life ended "in thin particles" but to the traditional and spiritual (Hasidic) values, the sacred vision of life they cling to while facing extreme violence. It is hence an attempt to fictionalize, aestheticize and renew the spirituality and values of a people who suffered and died without choosing an open resistance (to take arms). The novel honors the dignityj of the victims who were seen as "complicit" for they died without "heroically" defending themselves, so that their death would not be forgotten and/or considered again as another humiliation, but can teach us today about the beauty,

[82] Fleur Kuhn Kennedy, *Le disciple et le faussaire. Imitation et subversion romanesque de la mémoire juive*, Paris: Garnier, 2016.
[83] Kuhn Kennedy, *Le disciple et le faussaire*, 48
[84] See Raul Hillberg, *The destruction of the European Jews.* Yale University Press 2003 (first edition 1961), 1128.

strength, wisdom it carries.[85] His novel, hence, does not aim at filling a gap, a void or an absence as one would think from a historical and memorial perspective but to honor their presence. (Death does not equate to nothing but something). It should be noted that by honoring his people, André Schwarz-Bart did not intend to be a spokesman representing the Jewish community, but to respond to the injunction of memory as an act of love, or to pay homage by symbolically placing a little white stone on their graves as required in the Jewish tradition where the novel replaces the physical ritual of the mortuary, which could not take place. Through his writing, André Schwarz-Bart restores a dialogue with the previous generations- to remain in communion with his people, whereas to forget them would be like a second death that is not only physical but also spiritual. By maintaining a dialogue, a subjective and existential relationship with their presence, the prophetic message of his people did not die but can be renewed. André's perspective could be seen as "decolonial" at the European level, exhuming the vision and way of being to the world of a subaltern or minor culture, Hasidic culture, within Europe and European Judaism.

Simone Schwarz-Bart's novel, *The Bridge of Beyond* responds to a similar aspiration in the Caribbean context. She writes in the memory-trace of her own people to pay homage to a world on the verge of disappearance, to sanctify a time in which an

[85] Francine Kaufmann explains that Schwarz Bart's intentions to write the novel spurred from his willingness to respond to young orphans he met in a youth center where he worked as an educator and had to face the haunting and recurring questions of why Jewish people did not defend themselves and if they really die like sheep led to the slaughterhouse. See Francine Kaufmann, *Pour relire le dernier des Justes. Reflexions sur la Shoah* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1987), 18.

older generation of women had lived and was about to disappear in silence. The novel was inspired by the life of a woman from her village, in Goyaves: Stéphanie Priccin.[86]

> "J'avais vraiment besoin de respirer son odeur [odeur de Télumée], comme une fleur qui livre un parfum dont on essaye de retrouver le nom et cette femme-là un jour m'a regardée et c'était un peu la fin je pense qu'elle sentait venir. Elle m'a dit : « Alors nous allons tous disparaitre sans qu'il n'y ait aucune trace, pourtant nous avons existé. Cette terre nous l'avons foulé tant nous l'aimons et tout va disparaître comme ça ? »
> (…) Ce livre c'est un hommage à ces femmes que j'ai côtoyées, c'étaient des femmes fortes, et obligées d'être fortes alors que l'esclavage avait vraiment déconstruits complétement les hommes, les avait mutilés parce que tout simplement ne leur permettant pas d'assumer leur rôle de père, de mari, de protecteurs d'une famille. Quand on vend vos enfants à des maitres différents on éparpille le sang. Comment peut-on ne pas être diminué ?
> La femme par contre était obligée de compenser, il y avait un devoir de transmettre aux enfants les valeurs, les références, et aussi une joie de vivre, et bien sûr ces femmes c'étaient **des Justes en moi**."

> " I really needed to breathe her fragrance, as a flower who exhales a perfume whom one tries to find the name again, and this woman one day looked at me and it was a little bit the end I think she felt coming. She told me: « So we are all going to disappear without any trace, yet we existed. This land we sat foot on it, we love it so much and everything is going to disappear like that? » (…) This book is a tribute to those women that I knew, they were strong women, and forced to be strong when slavery had completely destroyed men, had mutilated them because simply they could not fulfill their responsibility as fathers, husbands, protectors of a family. When your children are sold out to different masters, dividing blood. How can one not be diminished? Women, on the contrary had to compensate, there was a duty to pass down to children values, references, and also a joy to live, and of course those women were **the Just in me**." [87][My emphasis]

Simone Schwarz-Bart creates an allegorical and exemplary character, informed partly by the life of Stephanie Priccin that she poeticizes and re-writes through the filter of her own imagination. While simultaneously restoring the memory of a whole generation and thus the collective history of Guadeloupe that had never been told in a written form, the novel celebrates the courage and silent resistance against the inhumanity endured by those living under slave conditions and colonial domination

[86] Roger Toumson and Eliane Toumson "Interview avec Simone et André Schwarz-Bart. Sur les pas de Fanottes" *Textes Etudes et Documents* 2 (1979), 18.
[87] Simone Schwarz-Bart, Interview by Camille Clavel.

and whose existence continued to be negated by the dominant French culture even after the abolition of slavery.

Writing a novel (as opposed to a testimony), exactly as André Schwarz-Bart did for his first novel, allows her to express the soul of her people, and to show how their existence still has a meaning for today. She links that aspect to the oral tradition of Africa: "Je pense, voyez-vous, comme les Africains, que lorsqu'un vieux meurt, toute une bibliothèque disparaît…" ["I think, you see, like the Africans, when an old person dies, an entire library disappears"][88]. This reference to traditional African wisdom confirms this idea to safeguard a living story – to relay, – to pass on, not just an account of their life but to consider the heuristic value of their teachings and important stories. And she also sees this novel as "a memory space" [89]– which implies that the novel does not aim at erecting a status or a monument of this exemplary character but functions as an open space where one can circulate through time and enter in relation with the characters at a subjective and existential level.

Loosely based on historical facts, *The Last of the Just* is rooted in a long spiritual tradition of storytelling in Judaism since Biblical times. If one considers the Torah originating from an oral tradition, Hasidism, the pietistic reform movement among Eastern European Jews of the 18th and 19th century, renewed the traditions of storytelling while bringing a popular dimension to the themes of Jewish mysticism developed in Kabbalah.[90] This movement has for a long time been marginalized within European Judaism, but has recently been revived by Jewish thinkers such as Martin

[88] Roger Toumson and Eliane Toumson, "Interview avec Simone et André Schwarz-Bart," 18.
[89] Roger Toumson and Eliane Toumson, "Interview avec Simone et André Schwarz-Bart," 18.
[90] Yitzhak Buxbaum *Storytelling and spirituality in Judaism* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1994), 6-7.

Buber, Gershom Scholem, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Marc-Alain Ouaknin to name a few… As the last mystic movement of Judaism, Hasidism came as a time of renewal, a movement of emancipation within Judaism to shake the rigidity of the institution, to bring about questioning and debate, creating a renewed ethical relation to time at a personal and existential level. Consonant with the mystical movement of Kabbalah, it is a response to the historical and political conditions of the Jewish as a people in exile, in the context of hatred and persecution and against the dogmatism and elitism of the leading political and religious authorities in Europe (within and outside Judaism).[91]

After the trauma of the expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Lurianic Kabbalah came as a response to the historic exile of the Jewish people. It encouraged the Jewish community to consider their own exile as an allusion to the cosmic exile of G--d (the dispersion of the *Shekinah*, the divine feminine presence) and not as a fatality, and as a positive mission or a responsibility vis-à-vis history [to reassemble the holy sparks that fell into the world] to prepare and work for the world's redemption (or *Tikkun Olam*).[92] The Hasidic movement that emerged in Poland under the leadership of the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good name) extended this vision of "revolt in history" at a personal and existential level: the capacity for each individual to be in direct contact with the divine, to perfect oneself and to participate in repairing the world. This was an affront to the elitist and dogmatic view that the

[91] Marc-Alain Ouaknin *Tsimtsoun, Introduction à la méditation hébraïque* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), 30-31.
[92] Marc-Alain Ouaknin, "Ouverture hassidique" in *Dieu et les Juifs*, ed. Josy Eisenberg (Paris: Albin Michel, 2009), 138.

common people were not erudite enough to comment on sacred scriptures. The Baal Chem Tov and the Hasidic movement claimed that anybody can have a direct relationship with words and bring a worthy interpretation of holy scriptures through the practice of exegesis (*Pardes*). Considering that spirituality does not reduce itself to the close circles of the erudite who devote their life to studying the holy books, he questioned the hierarchical social divisions within Judaism to provide a direct and egalitarian access to the practice of hermeneutics and relation to the divine.[93] In fact, demonstrating the pitfalls of those who accumulate knowledge but only come to repeat what is already said, Hasidism claimed the importance of questioning and transforming oneself through the study of words. It is a movement rooted in Torah that attempts to emancipate followers from the violence and imposition of rigid meanings of words and hierarchical status, in order to assert the importance of subjectivity (a unique view) in each individual.

In addition, the Baal Chem Tov showed a different way to access the mystery: instead of using texts of the traditions, he started to narrate tales.[94] He affirmed the transformative power of storytelling, stories of the deepest wisdom, in particular stories of the *Tzaddikim* (or *Tzadik*, a "righteous one" or a "Just") as an exalted form of engaging with mystical study. The *Tzaddikim* being considered as those who serve the divine on earth, praising and studying the lives of the righteous ones, telling stories

[93] Marc-Alain Ouaknin, "Ouverture hassidique", 141-142; Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, trans. Maurice Friedman (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988), 61.
[94] On that practice he would have explained: "If I continue to lead you on this path (to use the books of the tradition), you will have the illusion that you can reach a definite truth. Then, what I am going to do is to narrate tales." (Marc-Alain Ouaknin, "Ouverture hassidique", 145)

about them is equivalent to praising the divine, and is a spiritual practice as valuable and powerful as praying or studying the traditional holy books.[95]

While Hasidism is a movement within a specific religious tradition, it can also be seen as a search of mankind to redefine one's own humanity, by rejecting prejudices, illusions and ideological stereotypes and by renewing an ethics open to the world, open to the (divine) mystery of the world and the other. By experiencing first-hand the violence of dogmas and prejudices, Hasidism comes from the Hebrew word "hasid", but also "loving kindness". It developed an ethic to the other: to love the other as equally or more important to love G--d or the words of G--d; It developed an ethic to welcome the foreigner: a capacity to see the positive transformative power of the relation to the foreigner[96]. Hasidism as a revolutionary tradition came to remind human beings that the meaning-making of truth or enlightenment resides in its own movement of creation and perfectibility in mankind.

I now draw a parallel between Hasidism and Caribbean culture, not as a folklore or a tradition frozen in time, but as a living culture and spirituality that came to birth from the violent experiences of exile and slavery. Caribbean culture, its Creole language, dancing, musical and spiritual traditions, like Hasidism, are a force to renew humanity, a humanity that has been reduced to its most bare attribute, a naked body, deprived of its own language and name. Forced to come into contact with the other, this humanity survived and created anew. This new "modern" humanity reinvented a way of being to the world that can inspire and teach us today and is not just the

[95] Yitzhak Buxbaum, *Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism,* 9-15.
[96] Marc-Alain Ouaknin *Tsimtsoun, Introduction à la méditation hébraïque,* 23-24.

remnant of an old tradition from the African diaspora and "pre-modern" cultures, victim to slavery. Edouard Glissant puts forth the idea of the *Relation* grounded in the Caribbean concrete experience, which encompasses the idea of a growing, rhizome identity – *Identité Relation* (at an individual and existential level) – the idea of a philosophy and Poétique (at the level of language and thoughts). *Relation* is always open to the other, the other as the unexpected, or mystery – or opacity, a term Glissant prefers, insisting on the idea of obscurity present in the process of enlightenment[97] – *Relation* can be seen as a Po-ethics – or close to the Greek term "Poiesis" (which means in ancient Greek "making- creating") – the movement and opening to the other as a transformative mode of creation in the world. And I would also relate this idea of dynamic movement of creation to an image of the sugar-cane factory used by Simone Schwarz-Bart's mother,[98] an existential transformation out of the most brutal capitalistic exploitation of the human body.

Creole – which also comes from the Spanish term "criar" (to raise) of the latin "crier" which in French gave "créer"— was also born from the infinite capacity to

[97] Edouard Glissant,*Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wings (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997); Edouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, trans. Natalie Stephens and Anne Malena (Calicoon, NY: Night Boat Books, 2010).

[98] Simone Schwarz-Bart explains: "My mother always used to tell me: "we were trained in the sugar factories, and we became factories ourselves. And we're factories because what we manufacture is ourselves; we make ourselves; you have to make yourself and it's also you who must forgive and forgive them. My mother was of the belief: "mercy for all sin." If they treat you like a Negress, rise above it, because "my daughter you know who you are, nobody can teach you who you are. Let people say *this or that*. You know who you are, and you know your value, be satisfied with that and don't talk back. It's useless to talk back to people who don't want to listen. For one thing, if they've said that to you it's because they don't want to listen, they don't want to see you, they don't want to listen to you. For another, if you start discussing their prejudices it's because you're taking their prejudices to heart, it's because you're giving them weight, so stop that. And rise, rise, rise above. Find a way to have wings, don't take that in your heart. And accomplish your destiny." [Interview by Elise Finielz with Simone Schwarz-Bart, Paris, July 2017, trans. Hannah Hughes]

create meaning within the detours and contours of African and European languages, with and against the dominating power of colonial languages.

Glissant's idea of *Relation* can be seen as an ethical response to the blind lights of Western civilization and its dogmas: the imperial domination of oneness (and assimilation- A world thinking of itself as The world), absolute truth (a truth that takes the unique root in the logos – excluding the mythos[99]) and a generalizing and dogmatic concept of universality.

Relation refuses the oppressive and totalitarian qualities of monotheist religion, but nevertheless retains an ethical dimension and could be seen as a secular version of "Religion" at the level of the world (including the diversity of the world or the *Tout Monde* "All-World") in the etymological sense of the word "Religion", coming from the latin "religare" which has the same root as the latin verb "ligare" –in French "lier" - "to connect", also found in the verbs "relater" "to relate" (to narrate) and "relayer", "to relay" (to pass on).

Like the *The Last of the Just*, *The Bridge of Beyond* takes the model of a saga and retraces the story of a legendary family: four generations of women, starting just after the abolition of slavery. Most of the novel focuses on the character of Telumée, the last of her lineage, retracing her birth, childhood and adulthood. Télumée, as her first name indicates, represents the earth ("Tellus" in Roman mythology is the goddess of earth, from the latin "tellus, -uris which means "earth"). She is part of the "Lougandor" family, a name reminiscent of Africa: the root "Lougan" means "a piece

[99] See: Jacques Coursil, "Categories in Edouard Glissant's writings (2nd version)", http://www.coursil.com/bilder/3_language/Literature/Edouard%20Glissant%27s%20categories.pdf.

of land" [un carré de terre] in Wolof according to the author.[100] If Télumée is a legend, I argue that the mythic elements are not to be considered in a negative sense: a myth creating one single and fixed meaning. Rather, it would be in a positive sense, like a myth that calls for the movement of meaning and the practice of interpretation- in a sense a 'decolonial' hermeneutics. Hence, it also responds to an ethical imperative and appears as an authorial intention with broader political implication. It participates in a well- crafted story of a "Just" woman. To view Simone's story as the story of a Just, but as a unique, secular, Caribbean version, we can better envision the force of contestation it carries and the ethical vision Caribbean culture purports in general.

From a gender perspective, the novel is also groundbreaking as it reasserts the spiritual role of women that tend to be concealed within a patriarchal perspective. In the Jewish tradition, the *Tzadik* is usually male, as well as the storyteller. In the Caribbean tradition, the *Creolist* movement honoring the storyteller, praises him as being predominantly male:

> "C'est lui [le conteur] le seul producteur de littérature audible, une littérature articulée dans l'ethno-texte de la parole et qui, dans la parole, se forge un langage soumis aux ambivalences de la créolisation, à l'opacité de Détour pour survivre à l'inédit insoupçonné de la culture créole."
>
> "He [the storyteller] is the sole producer of audible literature, a literature rooted in the ethno-text of the oral word and which, within the world of orality, forges a language subject to the ambivalences of creolization, the opacity of the roundabout route taken in order to survive, and to the unsuspected novelty of Creole culture."[101] (Translation Ferly)

[100] Roger Toumson and Héliane Toumson "Interview avec Simone et André Schwarz-Bart. Sur les pas de fanotte", 18.
[101] See *Eloge de la créolité*. Quoted in Odile Ferly, "Writing Cultural and Gender difference: Sylviane Telchid's *Throvia de la Dominique," Cardiff University New Readings* 7 (2004): 8.

Because of the divisions of gender roles in the social structure of the Caribbean, women are usually the storyteller for children. But as critics have shown[102], the story-telling tradition is a practice that involves both men and women. We will see that this role appears in the novel and the tales told to children are also stories of the highest ethical values.

2. The Just, as the pillar of the world or the poto-mitan

André Schwarz-Bart's legend of the "*Lamed-waf"* is a variation of a Yiddish legend, a legend that thrived in a mystical phase of Hasidism and takes its root in esoteric Jewish tradition. The Yiddish term "*Lamedvovnik*" designates one of the 36 righteous men or *Tzaddikim* on which the world is sustained. Mentioned in the Torah and the Talmud as an ideal figure, the *Tsaddik,* the Just or the Righteous, there is no single and stabilized definition.[103] It is said in the book of Proverbs (X, 25): "The righteous is an everlasting foundation" ("stands firm forever"). The righteous, in ancient Judaic books, is the one through which the divine presence manifests itself for the blessing of the world. Thanks to the presence of only one of them, God would save the world (as the example of Noah). The Babylonian Talmud mentions: "The earth rests on one pillar and a righteous person is its name" (Hagigah 12 b). Through the acts or merits of the righteous, his/her presence benefits the world. And as a pilar, the world can have faith in divine justice. The number 36 would indeed be linked to a

[102] Renée Larrier, *Francophone women writers of Africa and the Caribbean,* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 14-27; Ferly, "Writing Cultural and Gender difference," 1; Gyssels, *Le folklore et la littérature créole,* 27-28.
[103] Guershom Scholem, "Tsaddiq, le Juste" in *La mystique juive, les thèmes fondamentaux.* Trans. Maurice R.Hayoun (Paris: Cerf, 1985): 103-149.

bible verse: Isaïah 30:18 "Blessed are all who wait for him," "him in Hebrew is the word "lo" which has a numerical correspondence of 36 according to an exegete tradition (*Gematria*) that associates letters and words to a specific number, explaining the presence of 36 *Tzaddikim* to sustain the world thanks to their presence and actions.[104]

In the Caribbean, women are considered as the "poto-mitan", a Creole term that designates the pillar, or the crossbeam which supports the house. In the Vodou religion, the poto-mitan is the central pillar of the temple, placed in the middle of the peristyle (the sacred center of the temple where the rites are performed), where the deities can descend to inhabit a human body. It symbolizes the connection between the earth and the divine world. In Caribbean culture, the term also designates the extraordinary strength of women who, in the times of slavery and to a certain extent, in today's time, have been the pillar of the family and the community, often because the men were denied their paternal status, reduced to their bare physical force in the plantation and even used as reproductive cattle.

> "Ce sont les femmes qui ont tout sauvé, tout préservé, y compris l'âme des hommes. Ce sont des gardiennes jalouses qui ont toujours lutté en silence. Quand l'homme antillais faisait des enfants sans revendiquer la paternité, celle qui devait assumer la lignée, accomplir les tâches quotidiennes, s'occuper des enfants tout en leur transmettant les traditions ancestrales, c'étaient naturellement la femme."
>
> "It is women who have saved, preserved everything, including men's souls. They are the jealous guardians who have fought in silence. When a Caribbean man made babies without claiming paternity, the one who had to assume responsibility, accomplished the daily tasks, care for the children all while passing onto them the ancestral traditions, was naturally the woman." [105] (Translation Green)

[104] Kaufmann, *Relire le dernier des Justes,* 155.
[105]Marie-Jean Green, "Simone Schwarz-Bart et la tradition feminine aux Antilles," *Présence francophone* 36 (1990): 131.

Women demonstrated an enduring physical force as in the proverb "however heavy a woman's breasts, her chest is always strong enough to carry them" (originally known in Creole as "tété pa janmen two lou pou lèstomak."[106]) More importantly, they preserved the culture and values of the group, keeping alive the bodies and souls of the whole community, particularly the men. They bore the responsibility of the material, physical and spiritual survival of the group within the context of colonial oppression.

If the term "just women" is not to be found in Simone's first novel, one can see a strong correspondence or an echo between the lineage of Jewish "just men" and the Caribbean "just women". What characterizes first and foremost the "just women" of the Lougandor lineage lays on their hope, a faith in life which is the ground of their extraordinary forces.

> "Dans mon enfance, ma mère Victoire me parlait souvent de mon aïeule, la négresse Toussine. Elle en parlait avec ferveur et vénération, car, disait-elle, tout éclairée par son évocation, Toussine était une femme qui vous aidait à ne pas baisser la tête devant la vie, et rares sont les personnes à posséder ce don. Ma mère la vénérait tant que j'en étais venue à considérer Toussine, ma grand-mère, comme un être mythique, habitant ailleurs que sur terre, si bien que toute vivante elle était entrée, pour moi, dans la légende."
>
> "When I was a child my mother, Victory, often talked to me about my grandmother Toussine. She spoke of her with fervor and veneration: Toussine, she'd say, was a woman who helped your head up, and people with this gift are rare. My mother's reverence for Toussine was such I came to regard her as some mythical being not of this world, so that for me she was legendary even while still alive." [107]

Toussine was herself the daughter of Minerve[108] who is the first of the lineage and started her life in bondage:

---

[106] Bernabé, "Contribution à l'étude de la diglossie littéraire," 126.
[107] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent*, 11; *The Bridge of Beyond*, 3.
[108] The choice of the name Minerve might be a reference to the Roman Goddess of strategic war, wisdom, justice, craftmanship and art.

> "Toute jeune encore, vaillante, les reins toujours ceints d'une toile de journalière, Minerve avait une peau d'acajou rouge et patinée, des yeux noirs débordant de ***mansuétude***. Elle possédait *une foi inébranlable en la vie*. Devant l'adversité, elle aimait dire que ***rien ni personne n'userait l'âme que Dieu avait choisie pour elle, et disposée en son corps*.**"
>
> "Still young and strong, always dressed in a worker's overall, Minerva had a glossy, light mahogany skin and black eyes brimming over with **kindness**. She had an unshakable faith in life. When things went wrong she would say that **nothing, no one, would ever wear out the soul God had chosen out for her and put in her body**." [109] [My emphasis]

We can see in her description the qualities of the Just, in particular her eyes expressing "la mansuétude", a term derived from the latin "mansuetodo" designating gentleness, benevolence, a disposition inclined to love and kindness, patience, and mercy. As her mother, she demonstrates faith in life and the power to remain herself whatever the circumstances. From "Reine Toussine" (Toussine Lougandor), she became "Reine Sans Nom" after the accidental death of her daughter Méranée, followed by the birth of her last daughter Victoire. The day of her daughter's baptism, the community, who came for the celebration, proclaims to her in one voice: "Nous avons cherché un nom de reine qui te convienne mais en vain, car à la vérité, il n'y a pas de nom pour toi. Aussi désormais, quant à nous, nous t'appellerons : Reine Sans Nom." / "We have tried and tried to think of a name for you, but in vain, for there isn't one that will do. And so from now on we shall call you 'Queen Without a Name'"[110] Her election as a Queen is a fact of the collective, a sort of democratic designation, not grounded in a particular filiation or heredity, nor the transmission of material and territorial possessions.

[109] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent,* 13; *The Bridge of Beyond,* 5.
[110] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent,* 29; *The Bridge of Beyond,* 21.

In the context of Caribbean history, "Sans Nom" could evoke the erasing of the names of the African captives. But it can also refer to the idea of anonymity of the Just, who can sometimes be unaware of their own condition. The theme of anonymity is essential in the definition of the Just in André Schwarz-Bart's novel: "(…) rien ne (les) distingue des simples mortels; souvent ils s'ignorent eux-même." ["(…) indistinguishable from simple mortals; often they are unaware of their station."][111] The anonymity of the Just is also to be found in the long tradition in Hasidism. Multiple legends of the "hidden just" portray the Messiah, the prophet Elijah or one *Lamedvav-tsaddikim* in beggars, travelers, or marginals and even robbers.[112] Differentiating the *Nistarim* (the hidden Just) and the *Mefoursamim* (the revealed), the hidden just would be of higher degree as they show humility and are kept from the temptation of pride and vanity.[113] Humility is seen as a virtue requisite in the saving of the world. It prevents the creation of a myth, in the sense of a fixed and rigid meaning (acknowledging to be a Just would mean that one has reached a revealed and established truth). Anonymity appears as a necessary exile from one's own being, while the Just accomplishes his mystic mission among the collective (contrary to other kinds of mystics who would isolate themselves from the community to connect with the divine- the idea of exile is however present in the different mystic practices).

Victoire, the daughter of Reine Sans Nom possesses the same noble qualities and the ability to transcend difficulties in life « with an elevated way to hold her head »:

---

[111] André Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes,* 15; *The Last of the Just,* 4-5.
[112] Kaufmann, *Pour Relire le dernier des Justes,* 165-167.
[113] Gershom Scholem, *Le messianisme juif* (Paris: Calman Levy, 1974), 361.

> "Petite mère était une femme qui portait son visage haut levé par-dessus un cou délicat. Ses yeux toujours entrouverts semblaient dormir, rêver à l'ombre de leurs cils touffus. Mais à bien observer son regard, on y lisait sa détermination à demeurer sereine sous la violence même des vents, et à considérer toutes choses à partir de ce visage haut levé. Personne ne s'était avisé de la beauté de ma mère à l'Abandonnée, car elle était très noire, et ce n'est qu'après que mon père eut jeté les yeux sur elle que tous en firent autant. (…) Lorsqu'elle bougeait, le sang affluait à sa peau, se mêlait à sa noirceur et des reflets lie-de-vin apparaissaient à ses pommettes. Si elle se tenait dans l'ombre, elle colorait l'air qui l'entourait immédiatement, et c'était comme si sa propre présence suscitait alentour une auréole de fumée."

> "Mama was a woman who carried her head high on a slender neck. Her eyes, always half shut, seemed to be asleep, dreaming in the shade of their thick lashes. But if you looked into her eyes well, you saw her determination to stay serene however harshly the winds might blow, and to see everything from the point of view of that head held high. No one in l'Abandonnée noticed her beauty, for her skin was very dark; it was only after my father set eyes on her that everyone else did the same. When she sat in the sun the black lacquer of her skin had glints the color of rosewood, like those you see in old rocking chairs. When she moved, the blood rose near the surface and mingled in the blackness and glints the color of wine appeared in her cheeks. When she was in the shade, she at once colored the air surrounding her, as if her presence created a smoky halo." [114]

The dark tone of her skin (situating her outside the socially accepted beauty norms of that time, which explains why nobody had noticed her beauty) creates an alchemical transformation: a halo representing the divine presence inhabiting her body and glorifying her person (une auréole de fumée/ a smoky halo). Her words also demonstrate a prophetic language:

> "ils peuvent toujours dire et redire, ceux qui ne trouvent pas mole leur couche sans avoir mis à mal quelqu'un…N'empêche que je suis qui je suis, à ma hauteur exacte, et je ne cours pas les rues mains tendues pour combler vos ventres creux…"

> "They can't say whatever they like. Some people can't sleep easy unless they've spoken ill of someone else. But I am what I am, just at my right height and I don't go begging in the streets to feel your bellies." [115]

[114] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent,* 33; *The Bridge of Beyond,* 25.

[115] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent,* 33; *The Bridge of Beyond,* 25.

The sentence in its literal meaning expresses Victoire's indifference to the village's gossip, especially those who are delighted to speak maliciously. But the expression "Je suis qui je suis" resonates with a direct Hebraic biblical reference: "Je suis celui qui suis" [116] that is also present in the *Last of the Just* ("on est qui on est") and in the teaching of Simone Schwarz-Bart's mother grounded in her Judeo-Christian faith. This reference regarding the ineffable name of the divine which has raised numerous theological and linguistic debates in monotheist religions– could be read as her transcending power, her being unconfined to a restrictive category of language and outside a temporal frame. It speaks of her as an enigma, a capacity to create and recreate the meaning of who she is, beyond the negative frozen representation of the other. The expression "à ma hauteur exacte"/ "at my right height", illustrates the nobility of her soul, and demonstrates her faith in her own being, her absolute faith, her capacity to rise above any slander or any prejudice.

3. Double hearts, multiple hearts – the enlightening presence of the Just

Télumée inherits the noble qualities of her bloodline, with her beauty, grace, and the capacity to transcend manifest reality. Her long journey does not lead to a series of heroic exploits but rather a long process of maturation (a physical errantry but a spiritual elevation). Protected by the grace of her grandmother, growing up with her loving care, she learns how "to shine" and to suffer. Like Ernie guided by his grandfather, her mysterious power does not reside in any particular action or mission

[116] See the Torah – Hebraic Bible - Exodus 3:14- Moses and the burning bush –

to accomplish. The Just is "like the sun", it is only through his/her presence that a Just "enlightens" the world.

> " - Oh, dis-moi, vénéré grand-père,' chuchota-t-il d'une voix à peine audible. 'Qu'est-ce qu'y doit faire un Juste dans la vie, hein ?'
> (…) - Le soleil, amour, murmura-t-il avec hésitation, est-ce que tu lui demandes de faire quelque chose ? Il se lève, il se couche : il te réjouit l'âme.
> - Mais les Justes ?' insista Ernie. (…)
> - C'est la même chose, dit-il enfin. Les Justes se lèvent, les Justes se couchent, *et c'est bien*… (…) Ecoute, si tu es un Juste, un jour viendra où tu te mettras tout seul à …*luire :* tu comprends ? "

> " 'Tell me grandfather,' he whispered, barely audible. 'What should a Just man do in his life?' (…) 'The sun, my little love,' he murmured hesitantly, 'do you ask it to do anything? It rises, it sets – it rejoices your soul.'
> ' But the Just Men?' Ernie insisted. (…)
> 'It's the same thing. The Just Man rises, the Just Man goes to bed, and *all is well.* (…) Listen, if you are a Just Man a day will come when all by yourself you will begin to…*glow.* Do you understand?'" [117]

> "Ton affaire est de briller maintenant, alors brille et le jour où l'infortune te dira: me voilà, tu auras au moins briller."

> "Your job is to shine now, so shine. And when the day comes that misfortune says to you, Here I am – then at least you have shown." [118]

As Francine Kaufmann shows, the hereditary filiation of the Just man in André Schwarz-Bart's novel responds to a fictional and historical necessity as it allowed the author to represent the repetition of a violent history of persecution across the generations.[119] The Just represents an exemplary character who experiences all the challenges and violence faced by the community. Ernie will "choose" to die with his people in Auschwitz. Télumée's life, as well, embraces the tumultuous destiny of her people from Guadeloupe after the abolition of slavery. After a blessed childhood under

[117] André Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes,* 212; *The Last of the Just,* 166-167.
[118] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent,* 148; *The Bridge of Beyond,*139.
[119] Kaufmann, *Pour Relire le dernier des justes,* 158-162.

the protection and love of her grandmother, she becomes a house employee for a wealthy white family relegated to the status of "une faiseuse de béchamel" ["a maker of béchamel sauce,"] and victim of the predatory sexual assault by her male employer. She will live through the domestic violence of Elie, her first lover, the brutal labor of sugar cane plantation, the death of Amboise, a second loving partner murdered during a factory strike and the departure of her adoptive child, Sonore.

As a Just, neither Ernie nor Télumée Miracle take away suffering and pain, on the contrary they endure it in its most violent manifestation. This idea of the duality of pain and joy is expressed in the image of an eye crying and an eye rejoicing (symbolizing the existence of pain and happiness in life). Télumée possesses "two hearts" like her grandmother Reine Sans Nom: one to accumulate pain and the other joy. This image is also to be found in the proverb told by the old wise women Man Cia: "Soit un vrai tambour à deux faces" [be a drum with two sides], a proverb translated from the Creole: "tanbou a dé bonda".[120] This proverb is usually understood as her power of resistance, but to me demonstrates her capacity of reversibility: to find the strength to suffer pain and to be happy.

In *The Last of the Just*, more than an intercessor with the divine, the Just is described as a "container of pain". Facing the intensity of the violent events and its culmination with the Shoah, the heart of the Just grows and multiplies: "Car les lamed-waf sont le Coeur multiplié du monde, et en eux se déversent toutes nos douleurs comme en un receptacle." And what appears important in André Schwarz-Bart's novel

[120] As Jean Bernabé points out in "Contribution à l'étude de la diglossie littéraire: le cas de Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle de Simone Schwarz-Bart" *Textes Etudes et Documents* 2 (1979), 118.

is communication through suffering or compassion in its etymological sense, from the latin "compatior" (or to suffer with). When released, the novel raised a series of critiques and mediatic controversies as some would see in Ernie the reenactment of a Christian martyr.[121] But Ernie choosing to accompany and assist his people does not change the course of the event. As stated in the novel:

> "(…) la mort d'un juste ne change rien à l'ordre du monde (…) Personne au monde, pas même un Juste n'a besoin de courir après la souffrance, elle vient sans qu'on l'appelle…"
>
> " '(…) the death of a Just Man changes nothing in the order of the world (…) nobody in the world, not even a Just Man, has any need to run after suffering, that it comes without being called…?'" [122]

Télumée herself facing the repetitive assault of Elie is warned by her grandmother to the uselessness of this suffering:

> "Télumée, mon petit verre en cristal, comme je démêle en ce moment tes cheveux, je t'en supplie de démêler la vie de la sienne, car il n'est pas dit qu'une femme doive charrier l'enfer sur la terre, et où est-ce dit, où là ça?"
>
> "Télumée, my little crystal glass, I beg you – as I am untangling your hair now, untangle your life from his, for it is not laid down that a woman must bear hell on earth. Where is that laid down, where?" [123]

If suffering exists, to take pleasure in suffering is unhealthy. Hasidic culture declares joy as an obligation and the *tsaddiq* is generally not someone who seeks redemption through penance. In *The Last of the Just*, Ernie is reprimanded as a young boy by his grandfather for attempting to commit suicide. Between suffering and joy, Télumée's grandmother exhorts her to choose joy:

---

[121] Francine Kaufmann, "Les enjeux de la polémique autour du premier best-seller français de la littérature de la Shoah," *Revue d'Histoire de la Shoah,* no.176 (sept.-dec. 2002): 68-96. http://judaisme.sdv.fr/perso/schwbart/revue.pdf.
[122] André Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes,* 220; *The Last of the Just,* 166-167.
[123] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent,* 161; *The Bridge of Beyond,*152.

> "Nous, les Lougandor, ne craignons pas advantage le bonheur que le Malheur, ce qui signifie que tu as le devoir aujourd'hui de te réjouir sans apprehension ni retenue. (…) alors fais ce que tu dois, c'est à dire: embaume-nous, ma fille…"
>
> "We Lougandor don't fear happiness any more than we fear unhappiness, which means that your duty today is to rejoice without apprehension or reserve. (…) So do as you ought, my child: give us your fragrance." [124]

If both novels portray the course of suffering of their community, giving the reader a full awareness of what it means to suffer, suffering continues to be questioned. Meditative questions punctuate both narrations:

> "Ce qui est loin (…) ce qui est profond, profond, qui peut l'atteindre ? "
> "Sommes-nous des hommes ? "
>
> "That which is profound, profound, who can reach it?"
> "Are we men?"[125]
>
> "Peut-être bien que toutes les souffrances, et même les piquants de la canne font parties du faste de l'homme (…) Parfois mon cœur se fêle et je me demande si nous sommes des hommes, parce que, si nous étions des hommes, on ne nous aurait pas traité ainsi, peut-être."
>
> "It may well be that all suffering, even the prickles in the canefields, are part of the glory of man (…) Sometimes my heart is rent and I ask myself if we are men at all, because if we were, perhaps we would not have been treated like that." [126]

The « Miracles » of the Just

In the end, Télumée's suffering, and recovery takes an exemplary value for the community and confers to her a growing stature, a « panache » in the words of her grandmother.

> "Si tu es heureuse, tout le monde peut être heureux et si tu sais souffrir, les autres sauront aussi…chaque jour tu dois te lever et dire à ton cœur : j'ai assez souffert et il faut maintenant que je vive, car la lumière du soleil ne doit pas se gaspiller, se perdre sans aucun œil pour

[124] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent,* 142; *The Bridge of Beyond,* 132.
[125] André Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes,* 221-222; *The Last of the Just,* 174-175.
[126] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent,* 250; *The Bridge of Beyond,* 241.

> l'apprécier… et si tu n'agis pas ainsi tu n'auras pas le droit de dire : c'est pas ma faute, lorsque quelqu'un cherchera une falaise pour se jeter à la mer…(…) Télumée, la peine existe, et chacun doit en prendre un peu sur ses épaules…ah maintenant que je t'ai vue souffrir, je peux tranquillement fermer mes deux yeux, car je te laisse avec ton panache sur la terre… "
>
> "If you are happy, everyone can be happy, and if you know how to suffer, the others will know too. Every day you must get up and say to your heart: 'I've suffered enough, and now I have to live, for the light of the sun must not be frittered away and lost without any eye to enjoy it.' And if you don't do that, you won't have the right to say 'It's not my fault' when someone seeks out a cliff and throws himself in the sea. (…) "Télumée, sorrow exist, and everyone has to take a bit on his shoulders. And now that I've seen you suffer, I can close my two eyes in peace, for I leave you with your own panache, your own air." [127]

It is important to note that Télumée never removes herself from the community. And if she becomes, for the community, a model of suffering and rejoicing in life, her exemplary recovery is also the result of the help from the community members. Their relations are thus of symbiosis. This evolution in stature is also something found in Hasidic literature[128] as Gershom Scholem on this topic explains,

> "Les auteurs hassidiques avaient très bien compris que le rapport du Juste avec ses congénères obéissait à une dialectique propre. Le juste ne fait pas que donner (…) Il ne reçoit pas moins qu'il ne donne. Il est lui-même exalté en voulant exalter ses congénères, et plus il accomplit sa fonction en tant que centre de la communauté, plus sa propre stature croît. En se faisant l'instrument des autres, le fleuve de vie qui coule à travers lui élève éminemment sa propre existence."
>
> "Hasidic authors had very well understood that the relationship between the Just and his fellows obeyed by its own dialectic. The Just not only gives (…) He receives as much as he gives. He is himself exalted while wishing to exalt his fellows, and the more he fulfills his function as the pillar of the community, the more his own stature grows. By making himself the instrument of others, the river of life flowing through him elevates eminently his own existence." [129]

But again the miracle does not equate a "spectacle" – leading to any heroic action. The miracle resides in the eyes – which appears in the root of the term

[127] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent*, 179; *The Bridge of Beyond,* 170-171.

[129] Gershom Scholem, *La mystique juive, les themes fondamentaux.* Trans. Maurice R.Hayoun (Paris: Cerf, 1985), 148.

"miracle" (from the latin "mira" – in French "mirer", in Spanish "mirar", in Creole "mi") : " Les "armes miraculeuses" ne sont pas des miracles comme certains désespèrent. Iconoclastes à l'inverse, elles brisent les mirages et délient les fantasmes. L'imaginaire est son lieu, le réel, son but." [The "miraculous weapons" are not miracles, as some despair. Iconoclast in reverse, they shatter illusions and release fantasies. Imagination is its place, reality its aim."][130] The miracle is an extraordinary vision of the ordinary, a transformation of the violence present in the narrative of the other (the colonial narrative, the racist narrative, any prejudiced narrative) to perform an opening of the eyes.

Télumée becomes "Télumée miracle" because she helped the fallen angel (l'Ange Médard)[131] to die as a human being. She welcomed him in her life and exposed herself to his violence (as a result, she lost her adoptive child, Sonore, who followed him and left her mother). Thanks to her benevolence, the community praises her greatness and honors her with the title "Télumée Miracle":

> "Chère femme, l'ange Médard a vécu en chien et tu l'as fait mourir en homme…depuis que tu es arrivée au morne La Folie, nous avons vainement cherché un nom qui te convienne…aujourd'hui, te voilà bien vieille pour recevoir un nom, mais tant que le soleil n'est pas couché, tout peut arriver… quant à nous, désormais, nous t'appellerons: Télumée Miracle…"
>
> "Telumée, dear, Angel Medard lived like a dog and you made him die like a man. Ever since you came to La Folie we have tried in vain to find a suitable name for you. Now you are very old to be given a name, but until the sun has set, anything may happen. So as for us, henceforth we shall call you Telumée Miracle."[132]

---

[130] See Jacques Coursil, "La catégorie de la relation dans les essais d'Edouard Glissant, Philosophie d'une poétique," in *Poétiques d'Edouard Glissant,* ed. Jacques Chevrier (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2000), 93-94, footnote 5. Online: http://www.edouardglissant.fr/coursil.pdf. The "miraculous weapon" is the title of Aimé Césaire book of poetry.
[131] The fallen angel in the story symbolizes a homeless man who has lost his dignity. He wanders without purpose in life and appears as predatory to others.
[132] Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et Vent,* 246; *The Bridge of Beyond,* 237.

In *The Last of the Just*, when Ernie turns into a dog, tired of being a human being, he remains a dog « aux yeux juifs » and he concludes in an ironic tone that he prefers « rendre l'âme » that means to die, than "give up his eyes." "Nous autres, nous ne rendons jamais les yeux, jamais, jamais, jamais. *Nous préférons rendre l'âme.* " / "We'll never give up our eyes, never, never, never. *We'd sooner give up our lives, arf, arf!"*[133]

This teaching of the "miraculous weapon", which is usually the weapon of the weak in the last resort – but also maybe his/her most powerful one, is present in the tale that Reine Sans Nom narrates to Télumée and Elie. The horse "Mes deux yeux" will take away the driver in an uncontrolled and mad race. Ronie Scharfman sees this tale as representing the madness of the man.[134] But I would add that the madness does not pertain to a particular gender characteristic but a mental status in relation with the relegated social position men have occupied in the Caribbean. The madness resides in the lost vision: the driver gave up his own vision to the horse and wanders all his life, a death drive that prevents him from loving the woman who crosses his way. The tale appears to me premonitory of the story of Elie, who will later lose the control of "his eyes" and enters the circle of violence, subjecting the woman he loves to physical abuse and psychological disparagement.

Lastly, if Télumée ends her life with joy, standing in her garden, this joy is not complete but comes with one "little regret" and it is where resides her true hope, this opening of a gap, a void, to keep the movement of life or more joy to come, the

[133] André Schwarz-Bart, *Le dernier des Justes,* 375; *The Last of the Just*, 300.
[134] Ronnie Scharfman, "Mirroring and Mothering in Simone Schwarz-Bart's Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle and Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea" *Yale French Studies,* no.62 (1981): 95.

opening of a messianic time and the possibility of redemption. Télumée standing up, through her joyful presence, questions and troubles the dominant narrative of a victim. This new vision, as a miracle, also alters the vision of the reader as they encounter the characters and their stories. Both novels create the conditions, even though fictive, for the reader to enter in relation and benefit from the transformative power of this relation at an intimate and existential level, that is also where reside the possibility of a social and political change.

To conclude, Simone Schwarz-Bart found herself through her relationship with her husband, André Schwarz-Bart and with him the history of the Caribbean (not in a transparent way but in light and shade). As their life and writing careers can be revealed through a mirror effect, their position in the literary field is also mirror: initially outsiders, acclaimed but also partially marginalized because of the existing racial and gender hierarchies and the perceived non-political content of their work. However, this marginalization comes with an 'epistemological advantage' that proves to be, in the end, at the foreground of a precursor position in the literary field. Reviving a storytelling tradition from a feminine point of view, Simone Schwarz-Bart is a pioneer in the French Caribbean literature of Guadeloupe and Martinique for introducing Creole and storytelling. Authors such as Maryse Condé, Gisèle Pineau but also Patrick Chamoiseau and Daniel Maximin to name a few, will appropriate and reinvent the female storytelling tradition. But beyond her influence on other Caribbean writers, she appears as a precursor in the re-definition of the political position of the Caribbean postcolonial writer. Reading *The Bridge of Beyond* in the light of *The Last*

of the Just helps us reassess Simone Schwarz-Bart's 'poetic intention' and understand better the political aspect of her work: it does not purport any political agenda but respond to a higher ethical and decolonial imperative, enlightening the disastrous effects of violent history and creating a space to reflect on our present-day postcolonial world. It is a call for more justice, in the broad sense of the word. What is the definition of Justice is another question that is ever changing with the political conditions of the present. But I would say that literature participates in thinking and reflecting in its political definition. Simone's case helps us better envision the position of women writers from the Caribbean, responding to this ethical imperative, independent and distant from the political field while remaining present by writing, a precursor position that has been adopted by male postcolonial writers too. To my mind, this 'ethical turn' is not a turn away from politics as critics have claimed but complicates the representation and position of the "engaged' writer. It can also be thought in the terms of Edward Said as a "vocation" of the intellectual "for the art of representing," [135] underlying the creative aspect of public representation, always ever changing and generally outside the framework of a political party: as "someone who cannot easily be coopted by governments or corporations, and *whose raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug."

[135] Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), *13.*

CHAPTER 2
MARYSE CONDE AND *THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS*[1]

The idea that becoming a writer is a vocation associated with a "gift" implies that any individual can access this position based on personal aptitude. Indeed, embarking on a career as a writer does not require any specific formal admission. In the United States, though Creative Writing courses do exist, they are not a requisite to being published. However, by reviewing the canonical authors in classical French literature, one can only note that access to a literary career is still delineated by material and symbolic borders such as class[2], gender[3], racial[4] hierarchies, which prevailed and are still prevailing today. Maryse Condé started her career as a writer in her forties. Forty years later, she has become one of the most renowned female authors of her generation and is considered an emblematic figure in Caribbean literature of French expression. A prolific author, she has published extensively (eighteen novels, four autobiographical or semi-autobiographical essays, eight plays, nine children's books and numerous writings of literary criticism). Her work has been translated into multiple languages and has been awarded many prizes.[5] In this chapter, I will examine

[1] I borrow the expression "The Republic of Letters" in reference to Pascale Casanova's book *La République mondiale des lettres.* Paris : Seuil, 1999
[2] Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art, Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris : Seuil, 1998).
[3] Delphine Naudier, "Les écrivaines et leurs arrangements avec les assignations sexuées," *Sociétés Contemporaines* 2, no. 78 (2010): 39-63.
[4] Sarah Burnautski, *Les frontières racialisées de la littérature française ; Contrôle au faciès et stratégies de passage* (Paris : Honoré Champion, 2017).
[5] Literary Prizes awarded to Condé include the Grand Prix littéraire de la femme (1987), the Prix de l'académie française (1988), the Prix LiBeratur (1988), the Prix puterbaugh (1993), the Prix Carbet de la Caraïbe (1997), the Prix Marguerite Yourcenar (1999), the Grand Prix Metropolis bleu (2003), the Hurston Wright Legacy Award (2005), the Prix Tropiques (2007), the Trophée des arts afro-caribéens (2008), the Grand prix du roman métis (2010), the New Academy Prize (alternative to the Nobel literature prize) (2018), and the Cino Del Duca World Prize (2021).

the ambivalence of her position in the Parisian literary field as a Black woman writer, in order to understand why her first two novels, *Heremakhonon* (1976) and *Une saison à Rihata* (1981) were published to an indifferent reception, while the third one *Segou* (1981, 1982) became a best-seller. For this purpose, it is necessary to look back at the first 40 years of her trajectory, taking into account her class/race and gender position in the socio-historical context. Those are decisive years, necessary to understand her initial access to publication and recognition in Paris as the "World Republic of Letters." I then turn to the beginning of Maryse Condé's career as a writer in order to explore how gender and race played out in her initial position in the French literary field.

I. Social trajectory of Maryse Condé

1. Growing up in a Black middle-class family in Guadeloupe

Maryse Condé was born Boucoulon on February 11, 1937, in Point-à-Pitre Guadeloupe, a French colony in the Caribbean at that time (until it acquired the status of an overseas department in 1946). As the youngest of eight children, she grew up in a family belonging to the small emerging Black middle-class. Both of her parents had access to a formal education through the French school system and professional position in the public sector, which resulted in a significant increase in their socio-economic status. Her father, born in 1874, just a generation after the end of slavery, was raised by a single mother who held cleaning jobs to make a living.[6] In turn, he

[6] There is a lot of uncertainty around the paternal lineage of Condé's father. Caribbean social structures tend to be matrifocal (mother-centered) in the lower working-class stratus, in a society inheriting the legacy of slavery and destruction of traditional family models. In the interview I had with Maryse

was able to receive scholarships and become a schoolteacher, before founding and managing a small credit and savings company. Maryse Condé's maternal grandmother, Victoire, a mulatto from Marie-Galantes, was a cook in a white family of "Blanc pays" (white Creoles).[7] Victoire's only daughter, Jeanne Quidal, received an education through her mother's employers and then was granted scholarships to pursue her high school degree. She was one of the first women of African descent in her generation to become a schoolteacher in Guadeloupe and one of the first black women to occupy this role in the colonial society of Guadeloupe.

Thanks to their professional achievements and the acquisition of wealth, the Boucoulons were able to enjoy a more comfortable lifestyle (they owned a house in the city center of Point à Pître, a secondary house in the countryside of Guadeloupe and they were one of the first families to own an automobile on the island). They had embraced French culture considered at the time as the only legitimate culture and would only identify with the cultural values of the dominant colonial system whose assimilationist politics, since the second abolition of slavery in 1848, had granted the promise of full French citizenship to the people in Guadeloupe and Martinique.[8] Maryse Condé's parents, as the majority of the people in Martinique and Guadeloupe,

---

Condé, she declared that her father would have come from a family of farmers from La Désirade, a little island close to Guadeloupe. For a renewed approach of the concept of "matrifocality" in the French Caribbean, see Stéphanie Mulot, "La matrifocalité caribbéenne n'est pas un mirage créole," *L'homme. Revue française d'Anthropologie,* no.208-209 (2013): 159-191, https://journals.openedition.org/lhomme/24691#tocto2n4.

[7] *Victoire des saveurs et des mots* (Paris: Mercure, 2006)/ *Victoire, My Mother's Mother*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Atria Book, 2010) is the story of her grandmother. Highly fictionalized, the book nonetheless addresses questions of social advancement and its emotional and psychological costs in the highly racialized Guadeloupean society at the turn of the century.

[8] Myriam Cottias, "Esclavage, assimilation et dépendance. Essai sur une relation colonial," *Cahier du Centre de recherche historique* 40 (2007): 143, https://journals.openedition.org/ccrh/3394#tocto1n3.

cultivated a love for France. France was not considered the repressive colonial power but the "haut-lieu de la civilisation" (the center for civilization) at a time when the history of slavery was disregarded. Using Fanon's terms, Maryse Condé acknowledges in her autofiction that she was "Peau Noire, Masques Blancs"[9] as she had been raised in a family that only valued French highbrow culture, while also questioning and nuancing Fanon's definition of alienation as an inferiority complex:

> "Mes parents étaient-ils des aliénés? Sûr et certain, ils n'éprouvaient aucun orgueil de leur héritage africain. Ils l'ignoraient, c'est un fait! Au cours de ses séjours en France, mon père ne prit jamais le chemin de la rue des Ecoles où la revue *Présence Africaine* sortait du cerveau d'Alioune Diop. Comme ma mère, il était convaincu que seule la culture occidentale vaut la peine d'exister et il se montrait reconnaissant envers la France qui leur avait permis de l'obtenir. En même temps, ni l'un, ni l'autre n'éprouvait le moindre sentiment d'infériorité à cause de leur couleur. Ils se croyaient les plus brillants, les plus intelligents, la preuve par neuf de l'avancement de leur Race de Grands-Nègres. Est-ce cela être « aliéné » ? "[10]

> "Were my parents alienated? To be sure, they took no pride in their African ancestry. They knew nothing about it. That's a fact! During their visit to France, my father never set foot in the Rue des Ecoles, where the journal *Présence Africaine* was the brainchild of Alioune Diop. Like my mother, he was convinced that only Western culture was worthy of existence and was ever grateful to France for allowing them to obtain it. At the same time, neither of them felt the slightest inferiority complex because of their color. They believed they were the most brilliant and the most intelligent people alive, positive proof of the progress achieved by the Black Race. Was that the meaning of 'alienated'?"[11]

Here, we see that her parents had achieved a high degree of self-pride in their blackness. They valued their Black identity while endorsing the colonial social and intellectual standards, which also speaks to a generational effect. The French politics of assimilation and its *mission civilisatrice* would be questioned by the following generation who had all studied in Paris and were active in the constitution of a Black internationalism and the recovery of African culture and civilization in the Caribbean

[9] Maryse Condé, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer : Contes vrais de mon enfance*, (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1999), 103.
[10] Maryse Condé, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*, 17.
[11] Maryse Condé, *Tales from the Heart. True Stories from my Childhood*, Trans. Richard Philcox, (New York : Soho, 2001), 8.

identity (starting with the Nardal sisters, Aimé Césaire, Suzanne Césaire, Léon Gontran Damas and the negritude movement in the 1930s). Nevertheless, this positive representation of Blackness would explain why the color issue did not really matter during Maryse Condé's childhood and contributed to building positive inner strength.[12] She remembers being loved and cherished while growing up but felt isolated as her family fostered social and racial exclusivity in a Guadeloupean society that still bore the wounds of slavery: "We couldn't mix with people outside. Of course, we never frequented whites. The blacks were too illiterate and uneducated, we didn't mix with them either. Mulattoes were half castes and so unacceptable. So, in fact we didn't mix with anyone. Nobody was good enough for us."[13] Consequently, Condé grew up cut off from the Guadeloupean Black popular culture, as she was forbidden to speak Creole at home or at school and to mix with children from the lower-class. She was also forbidden to participate in popular festivities such as the carnival.

Academic and intellectual achievements for her family were particularly valued as the path to secure social status. As a successful student at school with the promise of a brilliant future, at the age of sixteen she obtained a scholarship to pursue her education in Paris at the boarding school of Lycée Fenelon. This would lead her to the entrance exam of the famous *Ecole Normale Supérieure*.

---

[12] Condé explains, "Quand j'étais jeune, convaincue que j'étais intelligente, peut-être la femme la plus intelligente du monde, je n'avais aucun complexe. Ma couleur ne me gênait pas, pas beaucoup en tout cas, euh non non, pas du tout." / "When I was young, convinced that I was intelligent, maybe the smartest woman in the world, I had no complex. My skin color didn't bother me, or not a lot at any rate, uh no, no, not at all." Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Sarena Tien, August 2017.

[13] See the documentary *Maryse Condé, Une voix singulière*, directed by Jérôme Sesquin, written by Françoise Vergès, Jaraprod, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAb8RyzR9uo&t=702s. (13:28' – 13:53)

2. Paris, intellectual formation and the *Négritude* moment

Maryse Condé was one of the first women of her generation from Guadeloupe to be in a "classes préparatoire"[14] in Paris in the 1950s. She was among the few black women from Martinique and Guadeloupe to complete a college education in the French capital, following Paulette Nardal (the first student of color to study English Language and Literature at the University of La Sorbonne in 1920), her sister Jeanne Nardal (who like Paulette came to study French Literature at La Sorbonne in 1923), Suzanne Césaire (who studied Literature at the *Ecole normale supérieure* in 1936) and Gerty Archimède (who completed her law degree in University of La Sorbonne at the end of the 1930s).

Paris would be the first encounter with direct racial prejudice and the realization of the negative representation of her skin color in the eyes of others for Condé. Like her parents in her early childhood, she becomes victim to the racism overtly displayed at that time in public transportation; the epidermic racism that Frantz Fanon denounces in *Black Skin White Masks.*[15] She also remembers the expression of amazement on the quality of her French or her intellectual achievement, expression of

[14] The *Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles*, more commonly known as « Classes Prépas » pertains to French Post-Secondary education system. Located in high school, they consist of a two-year intensive program to prepare students to take the national competitive exam that would give them access to the *Grandes Ecoles,* including *L'Ecole Normale Supérieure.* Also known as *Normale Sup',* or *ENS*, located in rue d'Ulm in the 5th arrondissement of Paris, this highly prestigious and selective establishment has been conceived during the French revolution to form a body of trained teachers for secondary high schools in the whole national territory of the French Republic. Exclusively masculine, an *Ecole Normale Supérieure* for women was created in 1881 at Sèvres, which will only merge with the *Ecole Normale Supérieure,* rue d'Ulm, a century later, in 1985. Since its foundation in 1883, the Lycée Fénélon, first high school for girls in Paris, hosted a program to prepare girls enter the *Ecole Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles* of Sèvres.

[15] Frantz Fanon, "The fact of Blackness," in *Black Skin, White Masks,*109-140.

an ignorance regarding the history of Guadeloupe as a French territory and the persistent racialized representation of Black people as second-class citizens.[16]

> "Elle est mignonne la petite négresse! Ce n'était pas le mot "négresse" qui me brûlait. En ce temps-là, il était usuel. C'était le ton. Surprise, j'étais une surprise. L'exception d'une race que les Blancs s'obstinaient à croire repoussante et barbare."[17]

> "Isn't she adorable, the little Negro girl! It wasn't the words "Negro girl" that hurt. In those days it was a common expression. It was the tone. One of surprise. I was a surprise. The exception in a race whom the whites obstinately considered repulsive and barbaric."[18]

But Paris was also Maryse Condé's first exposure to the literature and political consciousness critical to a self-reflexive journey on the Black condition in the Caribbean and the history of colonial oppression, a history that was not taught at school or within her close family circle. It was in Paris that she would discover the novel *Rue Cases Nègres* by Joseph Zobel and the complexities of her social and racial background since she grew up in a family that protected her from the violent history of slavery. She would also discover the poetry of Aimé Césaire and through him the history of enslavement and colonization of the Caribbean.

After her first year, Maryse Condé abandoned her studies at the Lycée Fénélon. Distancing herself from the social expectations of her family, and the dominant legitimate culture she entered a period of self-questioning. She enrolled in modern literature at the Sorbonne University and continued her intellectual training on her own, spending more time outside the academic institution, reading in bookstores

[16] Condé's testimony reflects Fanon's comment: "What I am asserting is that the European has a fixed concept of the Negro and there is nothing more exasperating than to be asked : 'How long have you been in France ? You speak French so well.'" (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* 35)
[17] Maryse Condé, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer,* 97-98.
[18] Maryse Condé, *Tales from the Heart,* 105-106.

and libraries, going to exhibitions and movies, and traveling on her own across Europe.

She also read Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, disagreeing at that time with Fanon's racial treatment of the Caribbean women in the chapter "The Woman of Color and the White Man." Coming from a more educated social background, she would not identify with the experience of Mayotte Capécia, her inferiority complex and her desire to marry a French white man.[19] Condé's reaction highlights the difficulty of the masculine Black cultural and radical avant-garde of imagining the complexities of Black women's position in terms of race, gender and class.[20] Her testimony also speaks to the relative marginalized black female voice during that period.[21]

In the Paris of the 1950s, the effervescence of a Pan-African Black culture was revived with the anti-colonial movement. During World War II, many artists and intellectuals had fought on the side of the French Liberation Forces. Josephine Baker, for example, had entered the resistance movement and was sent to Morocco to lead a

[19] "We were mainly hurt by the second chapter: the woman of color and the white, in which F. Fanon talks about the lactification complex of Mayotte Capécia. It appeared to us that it was terribly unfair. We were young Caribbean girls, all of us on the verge to marry, accompany, follow Africans in Africa. It was the time of the Caribbean-African marriage. The idea to have a white partner, to suffer from a lactification complex appeared to us completely erroneous and false. Because we had some conceptual tools, we thought that maybe the mass of the people, the population suffered from alienation. And that the bourgeoisie, we, we, have surpassed this stage. We, on the contrary, were advocating for a return to the negritude values of Africa."
Conference held on Dec. 2, 2011 at Columbia University, "Transcolonial Fanon: Trajectories of a revolutionary Politics.", Key Note by Maryse Condé :
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Kxku1s6V44&t=2s

[20] Myriam Cottias and Madeleine Dobbie, "Joséphine Baker et Mayotte Capécia: race et genre dans deux biographies transcoloniales." In *Le postcolonial compare, anglophonie, francophonie,* edited by Claire Joubert, 248.

[21] Maryse Condé explains that she was received by Jean-Marie Domenach, the director of the French journal *Esprit* (a leading journal at that time) which had published a review of Frantz Fanon's work. In spite of her young age, she was heard with great attention, which to my mind prefigures her leading intellectual role. But there was no publicized or official account of her critical position.

special mission. Frantz Fanon had left Martinique to join the army of the General De Gaulle. The liberation of France with the efforts of the colonial forces had spurred the rise of independence aspirations all across the French colonial empire, asserting the pressing necessity for ending racial and political domination, and economic exploitation.

In 1950, Aimé Césaire published the *Discourse on colonialism*, and in 1955, the Bandung conference gave voice to the political ambitions of countries in the process of decolonization. During that time, Paris continued to attract many Black artists and writers, with the presence, for example, of Edouard Glissant, Joseph Zobel, Jenny Alpha (an actress and singer from Martinique). In residence from the U.S were the poets such as Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and Richard Wright, jazz artist Sydney Bechet, and actress Josephine Baker, to only name a few. In 1956, the first Congress of black writers and artists took place in La Sorbonne, organized by Alioune Diop, the director of the newly founded literary review *Presence Africaine.* While addressing the pressing issue of decolonization and the idea of *Negritude* and attracting black intellectuals from all over Africa and the diaspora, there is a notable absence of women. Only a few were in the audience, and one is on the picture taken before the opening of the conference (Rose Marie Claire Perez, the wife of the Haïtian writer Jean Price-Mars, President of the Congress).[22] If women were on the sidelines

[22] Cottias and Dobbie, 248.

in the debates about black radical politics, they would nevertheless embrace the negritude values at a personal and intimate level, as in Maryse Condé's case.[23]

Close to anticolonial and Marxist groups from Africa and the African diaspora, Condé fell in love with a young Haitian intellectual and activist, who returned to Haiti to fight the Duvalier regime. On March 19, 1956, she gave birth to her first child, Denis Boucoulon. As a single mother, she was forced to put an end to her university studies and to take a low-paying job in the French Ministry of Culture. While in contact with the African students in Paris, she met a comedian from Guinea, Mamadou Condé and married him as a way "to recover a rank in society"[24] in August 1959. On her decision to get married, Condé explains:

> "Condé (Mamadou) était un « Africain ». Non pas un « Guinéen » comme je l'ai prétendu par la suite, impliquant menteusement que Sékou Touré et l'indépendance de 1958 avaient joué quelque rôle dans ce mariage. Répétons que je n'étais pas encore suffisamment « politisée » pour cela. Je croyais que si j'abordais au continent chanté par mon poète favori, je pourrais renaître. Redevenir vierge. Tous les espoirs me seraient à nouveau permis. "
>
> "Condé was an 'African'. Not a 'Guinean' as I later claimed, falsely implying that Sékou Touré and the independence of 1958 had played a capital role in our marriage. At the time, I was not yet sufficiently politicized for that. I believed that if I could reach the continent sung by my favorite poet, I could be reborn. Restore my virginity. Regain my hopes."[25]

Here, Condé insists that her decision to marry an "African" man was less motivated by political reasons, contrary to what she would have previously argued. It helps us envision her gender position more clearly in relation to her economic situation at that time. As a single mother in the Paris of the early sixties, she was caught between a feeling of shame and the marginalization of her close family and social circles at a

[23] See footnote 17. The Guadeloupean-born writer Myriam Vieyra of the same generation is another example of a Caribbean/African union as she left for Dakar in the 1960s and married the Benin-born filmmaker Paulin Soumanou Vieyra.
[24] Maryse Condé, *La vie sans fard* (Paris : JC Lattès, 2012), 30.
[25] Maryse Condé, *La vie sans fard*, 34; *What is Africa to me?*, 22.

time when having a child outside marriage went against the moral standard of her social status. Condé also underlines her lack of political consciousness, as women were still on the margins of black radical politics in the anticolonial movement. It is important to note that she has not yet developed a desire to write or to develop a poetic language within the *Negritude* movement, unlike male authors.[26] Her endorsement of *Negritude*, although grounded in an idealistic image of a continent, appears less about a militant anticolonial gesture, or the research of a "lost identity", and more about the concrete personal desire of "rebirth" and self-transformation.

Besides sharing an African origin, Condé and her new husband had very little in common. Mamadou Condé came from a very modest family from the town of Siguiri in the northeast of Guinea. A fatherless orphan, his mother was a street market vendor. Though he had a primary school education in French and worked as an artist in theatre, he did not share Maryse's intellectual and literary interests. His decision to marry Maryse Condé may have been, according to her, driven by an aspiration of social mobility: "Our marriage was based on a misunderstanding. It was normal that all of this would end in divorce." [27] They would only divorce years later, after a long journey by Maryse Condé to West Africa where she would give birth to her three daughters.

3. Africa : between myth, reality and fiction

[26] See for example Patrick Chamoiseau who explains that *Negritude* was a stage in his development as a writer: inspired by Aimé Césaire poetry and the Marxist and anticolonial political agenda, he would write militant poems at an early age. He perceives later this creative stage as entertaining a defensive position in the framework of colonial representations: « a decolonization in the image of the winners. Emancipation according to the law of aggression ». See Patrick Chamoiseau, *Ecrire en pays dominé, 58-66.*

[27] Françoise Pfaff. *Conversation with Maryse Condé* (Paris: Khartala, 1993), 13.

Since the end of the 19th century, French people from the Caribbean or Guyana were present in West Africa, occupying high positions mainly in the French colonial administration[28] or in the French army. United by the prevalent assimilationist cause of the time, they considered themselves as European French and were perceived as such.[29] After World War II and more particularly during the time of decolonization, the relationships between the Caribbean and the African continent changed. If the return to the "mother-land" Africa had always been constitutive of Creole culture and identity,[30] the growth of *Negritude* within a larger context of Pan African aspirations would encourage migratory movements of Caribbean and Guyanese people to newly independent African countries. This return took various forms: temporary or long-term stays, memorial tourism (in the island of Gorée, Senegal for example) or definite settlement, and may have been encouraged by the lasting friendship of the newly elected leaders Léopold Sedar Senghor and Aimé Césaire, founding fathers of the *Negritude* movement. It is important to notice that in the Francophone world, these migrations are individual decisions and not the result of a collective project. They remained quite marginal (statistically)[31] but nevertheless contributed to the renewal of a Caribbean identity and Caribbean intellectual thought.

In 1959, facing challenges in terms of a professional career, Condé applied to teach in a Francophone West African country through the newly founded French

[28] This is the case of René Maran, whose father from Guyana worked in the French colonial service and who himself started as a colonial civil servant. He will quit his position after winning the Goncourt Prize in 1921 for his novel *Batouala* and his critique of the French colonial system.
[29] Céline Labrune-Badiane, "Voyages vers un 'continent imaginaire': antillais au Sénégal (1960-1970)," *Outre-mer* (2013): 137, https://hal.univ-antilles.fr/hal-00974141/document.
[30] Edouard Glissant, *Discours antillais* (Paris : Seuil, 1981), 30-31.
[31] Labrune-Badiane, "Voyages vers un 'continent imaginaire,'" 137.

overseas development agency with African countries. Sent to work in a middle school and high school in Bingerville in the Ivory Coast, she will then join her husband in 1960 in Guinea where Sekou Touré had become the head of state. Following a period of intense suffering and disillusion in Paris, her decision to move to a West African country, like her marriage, is motivated more by material and practical concerns than political ones. Discovering the continent of her ancestors that she only knew through literature appears to be her only way out, a starting point for a new life, and so despite the audacity of this enterprise, she departs alone with her young son. But contrary to her male counterparts who oftentimes occupied high position in public administration,[32] Maryse occupied a position that she experienced below the standards of her initial ambitions ("I was stagnating in mediocre teaching jobs"[33]).

Condé nevertheless strengthened her social capital[34] and developed a political consciousness. Through different relationships (professional, friends, sentimental), she came into contact with many intellectuals, writers, and politicians from newly independent African countries and the African diaspora. She was part of the effervescent moment of intellectual debates. In Guinea, her friendship with Mario de Andrade (one of the founding members of the Angolan Communist party), Amilcar Cabral (the leader of the nationalist movement of Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde islands), Seyni Gueye (a radical left Senegalese politician) and Nene Khaly (a

[32] Labrune-Badiane notes that intellectuals and writers from Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti and Guyana work in key positions of the Senegalese public administration or cultural and educative institutions. (Céline Labrune-Badiane, "Voyages vers un 'continent imaginaire,'" 138).
[33] Pfaff. *Conversation with Maryse Condé*, 18.
[34] The social capital designates the amount of social resources with regards to the authors' networks that can facilitate their editorial placements and movements. Pierre Bourdieu, "Le capital social," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, I, no. 31 (1980): 2-3.

literature professor and poet) from Mali, was a real life introduction to Marxism: she went "from political daydreaming to a true political consciousness" and "a kind of euphoria."[35] Her political formation was completed with intense readings of various anthropological, historical and political works ("Marcel Griaule, Germaine Dieterlen, Denise Paulme, Louis-Vincent Thomas and Georges Balandier"), as well as works by the pioneers of African literature of French expression (Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des battu* and Cheick Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë*).

Living more as an outsider or a "spectator"[36] of a society of which she knew little about the social codes and customs, she developed a critical eye allowing her to think the complexities of the social reality of a vast continent, as well as the complexities of her own position. Whether in Ivory Coast or in Ghana, she noticed that the Caribbean community lived separately in its own community as did the African-Americans in Ghana, which brought her to further question the myth of "La negritude" : "Plus j'allais, plus je constatais que la Négritude n'était qu'un grand beau rêve. La couleur ne signifie rien."["The more it went, the more I realized that Négritude was nothing but a wonderful dream. That color meant nothing."][37]

Maryse Condé also witnessed the failure of independence and the rise of a small corrupt elite that took over the resources of the country and restricted civil liberties, while the rest of the population remained in poverty encountering growing difficulties in acquiring the bare necessities for survival. She directly experienced the problem as the promotion of her husband to Director of the National Theater, an

[35] Pfaff, *Conversation with Maryse Condé*, 9-10, 21.
[36] Condé, *La vie sans fard*, 55.
[37] Condé, *La vie sans fard*, 190; *What is Africa to me?*, 159.

empty title for a measly salary, affected the living conditions of their entire family. The small benefits, through the intervention of the ministry of defense, would soon end as the political repression descended upon the entire country. The economic shortages and the daily fights against poverty during the Sekou Touré's regime coincided with a massive wave of brutality against the slightest movement of contestation, targeting first the professors' and teachers' community. Torture, imprisonment, and massive deportation represented what Maryse Condé would later call "the real face of African Socialism."[38] Fanon's latest work, that Condé discovered at his death, became enlightening:

> "Il me sembla que le chapitre III, "Mésaventures de la conscience nationale", avait été écrit à l'intention de la Guinée, quand les auteurs de la révolution en deviennent peu à peu les fossoyeurs"
>
> "Chapter 3, "The trials and tribulation of national consciousness' seemed to have been written expressly for Guinea, where the architects of the revolution gradually become its gravediggers." [39]

The very concrete and harsh experience of material difficulty encouraged her to distance herself from the Marxist revolutionaries and reflect upon the disconnect between the theoretical/political ideologies and the ramifications of their failed applications. This perspective spoke of her gender position (close but in the margins of radical politics), would require her to write and would inspire her first novel "*Heremakhonon*". This evocative title, a Malinke word translates as "Wait for happiness" and "Welcome house" and was also the name of the empty state-led supermarkets, which she saw as the symbol of the failed promises of the anticolonial movement.

---

[38] Vévé Clark, "Je me suis réconcilié avec mon île: une interview de Maryse Condé," *Callaloo* 12, no.1 (1989), 103.
[39] Condé, *La vie sans fard,* 128; *What is Africa to me ?* 104.

4. Coming to writing

In the final part of her African journey, encouraged by the example of some of her friends (in particular the Haitian author Roger Dorsinville), the desire to "blacken white pages" appears as a way to testify to the current political situation and contradictions faced by the newly independent African states. The engagement in serious literary activity, the writing of her first novel (*Heremakhonon*) occurs after a long period of what is perceived of as a "failed" relationship with Africa, a series of sufferings and wanderings from one country to another. Maryse Condé starts to write to untangle what Bernard Lahire calls "sa problématique existentielle"[40], but at a personal and collective level.

The process of writing emerges almost unexpectedly but with a sense of urgency. Beyond the mystical discourse that often surrounds the practice of writing and the naturalization of dispositions for creativity, our sociological analysis shows that the investment in literary writing occurs after a long period of literary socialization and formation through reading, journalistic activities, and immersion within literary circles. This was a moment when Condé had also gained more professional stability and self-confidence, as well as trust and positive encouragement from her surroundings. If writing occurs "unexpectedly", it is also because it has never been considered as a professional career. Like Simone Schwarz-Bart of the same generation, she had never identified with any writer that could symbolically help her

[40] Bernard Lahire, *Kafka, Eléments pour une théorie de la creation littéraire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 47.

contemplate becoming a writer herself because female Caribbean/African authors were only starting to write.

Writing was not a self-evident practice nor considered a vocation. It came with a certain "shyness" as she mentioned in the interview I had with her, a fear and lack of confidence that had to be overcome, a subjective feeling that had to be placed within the larger context of an emerging female voice in the literary field. It also required a shift of perspective. Writing appeared first to Condé as "a game of the bourgeois", associated with the dominant French legitimate culture taught at school and at the university. If the male poets of *Negritude* movement (Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar-Senghor, Léon Gontran Damas) inspired her to write, the privileged genres of that historical moment are poetry, critical essays, and drama (for Aimé Césaire). Once Condé realized the militant dimension of writing, she also had to come to terms with the negative representations of the genre of fiction. Although she also wrote plays and critical essays, she would excel and become most recognized for her novels.

> "Je n'avais pas une image positive de l'écriture et d'écrire donc j'ai hésité avant de me lancer et je me suis lancée avec une sorte de timidité.(…) J'avais peur d'écrire, pas confiance en moi en tant qu'écrivain, et puis un jour je n'ai pas pu résister je me suis jetée là-dedans. Mais ce n'est pas une démarche agréable, il m'a fallu fermer les portes, dominer ma peur avant d'y arriver.
> ***C'était plus la publication ou l'écriture en soi ?***
> Les deux."
> (…) D'abord de par mes opinions politiques écrire me paraissait un peu un jeu de bourgeois. Déjà. Pour écrire il fallait faire du théâtre parce que là on a un rapport immédiat, plus direct avec ceux qu'on appelait « le peuple », les masses donc il a fallu vaincre tous ces préjugés avant d'avoir le courage de faire un roman.
> ***Ah oui parce que vous pensiez qu'à travers l'écriture vous vous éloigniez des masses ou c'était un moyen d'avoir un …***
> Ben je pense que l'écriture détournait du vrai militantisme, on se faisait plaisir, on rêvait, on imaginait au lieu de se battre. Pour moi l'écriture, après j'ai compris que l'écriture pouvait être une forme de combat, mais au départ l'écriture c'est un peu une diversion.
> ***Et vous voyez les auteurs de la Négritude comme A Césaire, Senghor***
> Oui pas encore, je ne les connaissais pas
> ***C'est après en les lisant***

Après là, j'ai compris que l'écriture était une arme. Césaire avait un recueil de poésies qu'il appelle Les armes miraculeuses ». Après j'ai compris, au début je me méfiais de ma tendance, de mon goût pour l'écriture.
Et oui et en même temps vous faisiez des études de Lettres
Oui
Mais à cette époque vous ne vous imaginiez pas être écrivain ?
Pas du tout.
Mais en Afrique vous côtoyez un milieu intellectuel
Oui beaucoup de haïtiens qui écrivaient Roger Dorsinville, oui c'étaient des amis, Jean Brière. Oui mais c'était pas parce qu'ils étaient écrivains, oui c'est simplement parce que nous avions la même vision anticolonialiste, l'écriture venait après.

I was scared of writing, I had no confidence in myself as a writer, and then one day I could no longer resist, I threw myself into it. But it wasn't a pleasant process, I had to make an effort, to dominate my fears without knowing how.
Was it more the publication or the writing itself?
Both. (…) First of all, because of my political opinions, writing seemed a bit to me like a game of the bourgeois. Already. In order to write, it was necessary to do theater because there we had an immediate relationship, one that was more direct with whom we called "the people," or the masses, so it was necessary to vanquish all these prejudices before having the courage to write a novel.
Ah yes, because you thought that, through writing, you were distancing yourself from the masses or it was a way to have a…
Well, I think that writing diverts true militantism, we indulge ourselves, we dream, we imagine instead of fighting. I later understood that writing could be a form of fighting, but at the beginning, writing is a bit like a diversion.
And you saw other Négritude authors like A Césaire, Senghor?
Yes, not yet, I didn't know them.
It was after reading them?
After that, I understood that writing was a weapon. Césaire had a collection of poetry that he called *Les armes miraculeuses*. After, I understood, but at the beginning I was wary of my tendency, of my taste for writing.
And yes, and at the same time you were doing your literature studies.
Yes.
But at this time, you didn't see yourself becoming a writer?
Not at all.
But in Africa, you spent time with an intellectual milieu.
Yes, many Haitians who wrote, Roger Dorsiville, yes, they were friends, like Jean Brière. Yes, but it was because they were writers, yes, it was simply because we had the same anticolonial vision. The writing came afterwards.[41]

Comparing herself with the Senegalese woman writer, Mariama Bâ, Condé's experience attests to the difficulty and hesitations women encounter when entering the literary field. She highlights the importance of a positive confirmation from immediate

[41] Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Sarena Tien, August 2017.

surroundings on the quality of her work and the help of their social network to be published:

> Oui parce que moi je me compare à Mariama Bâ. Si on n'avait pas un ami qui était dans le domaine des éditions, qui nous encourageait à écrire, à publier je crois qu'on aurait jamais eu cette audace. Oui Stan [Stanislas Adotevi] a été le premier à aimer ce que je faisais et le premier à m'encourager à continuer.
>
> I compared myself to Mariama Bâ. If one didn't have a friend who was in the publishing field, who encouraged us to write, to publish, I believe that one would never have had this audacity. Yes, Stan [Stanislas Adotevi] was the first to like what I was doing, and the first to encourage me to continue.[42]

Mariama Bâ confirmed the context of the publication of her first acclaimed novel published in "Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines" in Dakar in 1979.[43] In an essay on the political function of written African literature, she also points out the symbolic obstacles that weigh on women's writing practices in general with regards to the reception of their work, such as the fear of moral disgrace that spurs silence and conformity to social injunction in the context of Senegal:

> "Dans toutes les cultures, la femme qui revendique ou proteste est dévalorisée. Si la parole qui s'envole marginalise la femme, comment jugera-t-on celle qui ose fixer pour l'éternité sa pensée? C'est dire la réticence des femmes à devenir écrivain. Leur representation dans la littérature africaine est presque nulle. Pourtant, comme elles ont à dire et à écrire!"[44]
>
> "In all cultures, a woman who claims her rights or protests is devalued. If the spoken word so marginalizes a woman, how much worse the consequences for her when she puts her thoughts on paper! That explains women's reticence to become writers. Their representation in African literature is next to nothing. And yet, they have so much to say and to write!" [45]

II. A break in the Parisian editorial world (1975-1985)

[42] Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Sarena Tien, August 2017.
[43] In an interview, asked if the *Nouvelles Editions Africaines* were the first publisher she approached with the manuscript *Une si longue lettre*, Mariama Bâ replies: "Yes, they were the first. I did not take it anywhere else. I have a friend who belongs to the reading committee, who read it and believed it was very good. He is the one who recommended it to be published immediately." (Harrell-Bond 400)
[44] Mariama Bâ, "La fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites," in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ,* trans. & ed. Azodo Ada Uzoamaka (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 403.
[45] Mariama Bâ, "The Political Function of Written Political Literature," 415.

1. Caribbean women and the publishing context in Paris

"***Has being a woman been detrimental to your career as a writer?***"

- Quite the opposite. It helped me a lot because people were curious to see what a black woman had to say, what she was thinking. Publishers never refused to read my manuscripts to see what I might be writing."[46]

In this quote, Maryse Condé insists that gender and color were not as a constraint but an advantage. It speaks indeed to the interest her work would spark off in the more welcoming publishing context of Paris in the 1970s and seems to undervalue the symbolic obstacles that she had to overcome. However, taking a closer look at the early years of her writing career, I will consider how, like Simone Schwarz-Bart, her marginalized position would turn into a precursor position.

In Paris, in parallel with her doctoral studies and the writing of her first novel, Condé was working part-time for the journal *Présence Africaine*, founded in 1947 by Alioune Diop. *Présence Africaine* had been participating in the structuring and implementation of an Afro-Caribbean literary scene in Paris from its beginning. Before its creation, because of the lack of specific publishing companies for writers of African descent, the extremely rare titles published by mainstream French publishers belonged to the broader colonial literature genre that integrated titles written by metropolitan French travelers, administrators or military men.[47] Censorship, as faced by René Maran's *Bataoula*, the first « roman nègre » to win the Goncourt prize in 1921 (usually considered as the founding novel of black literature of French

[46] Pfaff. *Conversation with Maryse Condé*, 18.
[47] Claire Ducournau, *La fabrique des classiques africains.* (Paris : CNRS Editions, 2017), 115.

expression), constrained the forms of publication and contributed to absence of a constituted public and of institutions of legitimate recognition.[48]

With the rise the *Negritude* movement, poetry became a privileged genre with two collective modes of expression: journals and anthologies whose interracial compositions and transnational contributors gave legitimacy to a literature that created bridges amongst Africa, the Caribbean and the US.[49] In the post-war context, Jean-Paul Sartre's journal *Les Temps modernes* occupied a leading position in the French intellectual-literary field. From philosophy and literature to politics, it covered a wide range of disciplines.[50] In order to exist, any other prominent journals had to conform to this logic of the market and create their own space in relation to *Les Temps modernes* (whether in opposition to or alongside with the journal).[51] *Présence Africaine,* which originated in 1947 on Alioune Diop's initiative, became a platform for the *Negritude* movement and its foremost authors, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon Gontran Damas, and Jacques Rabemananjara. The journal successfully defined its space within the Parisian intellectual field then dominated by *Les Temps modernes,* with the endorsement of leading figures of the French literary field such as André Gide and Jean-Paul Sartre, who were part of the editorial committee and contributors to the first issue and helped establish its legitimacy, while carving out its autonomy toward a new Afro-diasporic intervention capitalizing on the accumulation

[48] Julien Hage, "Les littératures francophones d'Afrique noire à la conquête de l'édition française (1914-1974)," *Gradhiva* 10 (2009): 83, https://journals.openedition.org/gradhiva/1523.
[49] Anthony Mangeon, "Miroirs des littératures nègres: d'une anthologie l'autre, revues," *Gradhiva* 10 (2009): 40-63, https://journals.openedition.org/gradhiva/1491.
[50] Nick Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory. History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press), 100.
[51] Anna Boschetti, *Sartre et "Les Temps modernes": une entreprise intellectuelle* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1985), 179.

of intellectual capital.[52] The publishing house, *Présence Africaine*, named after the journal, would become the first editor of African and Caribbean literature in terms of titles published up until 1990 in France.[53] In the 1960s, the editorial context appeared to favor literature of African authors and its diaspora. The importance of the question of decolonization stirred up interest in African literature and the perspectives of those who were colonized. Some politically engaged young publishers opened their own companies specifically to publish emerging authors from Africa and those of African descent: *Maspero* in 1959 (which published Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* in 1961), and *Pierre-Jean Oswald* in 1960. Some prestigious publishing houses also started to publish writers from African descent: *Julliard*, *Stock*, *Seghers*, *Le Seuil*, *Robert Lafont*, *Flammarion* and *Albin Michel*.[54]

Although women were numerically in the minority of this burgeoning literary scene of black writers in Paris, their contribution to the aesthetic and intellectual productions have been downplayed. Literary history usually recalls that Léopold S. Senghor and Aimé Césaire participated in the literary salon held by the Nardal's sisters where they would meet the intellectuals of the black diaspora during the interwar period[55]. Beyond the traditional role assigned to their gender (holding a salon, that was called *Cercle d'amis*), the Nardal sisters, the first black women from Martinique to hold degrees from La Sorbonne, had founded one of the first journals in

[52] Bernard Mouralis, "Présence Africaine: Géographie of an ideology," in *The Surreptitious Speech. Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*, ed. Valentin Mudimbe (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 3-13.
[53] Claire Ducournau, *La fabrique des classiques africains*, 116.
[54] Ducournau, *La fabrique des classiques africains*, 117.
[55] Robert P. Smith Jr, "Black like that: Paulette Nardal and the negritude Salon," *CLA Journal* 45, no.1 (Sept. 2001): 53-68.

Paris specifically dedicated to the cause of the African diaspora: la *Revue du monde noir*.[56] They laid down the theoretical and philosophical foundations for the Negritude movement, as stated in this excerpt of a letter from Paulette Nardal sent in 1960 to Jacques Louis Hymans, biographer of Léopold Sedar Senghor:

> *"Césaire et Senghor ont repris les idées que nous avons brandies et les ont exprimées avec beaucoup plus d'étincelles, nous n'étions que des femmes! Nous avons balisé les pistes pour les hommes"*
>
> "Césaire and Senghor took up the idea tossed out by us and expressed them with more flash and brio. We were, but women, real pioneers- let's say that we blazed the trail for them." [57] [Denean Sharpley-Whiting's translation]

From the 1920's through the 1970s, the rare number of published novels written by women from the Francophone Caribbean (all of them portraying a feminine character as their main protagonist struggling with the racial, gender and class prejudices of their time) went unnoticed. In 1924, only thirty copies of Suzanne Lacascade's novel, *Claire-Solange, âme africaine,* an early feminist expression of a Negritude endeavor, were printed (by Eugène Figuière, a Parisian publishing house). Ignored by the critics and barely known by the public, this work is "shrouded in mystery" because no information is available with regard to the author or the circumstances of its conception and publication.[58] Mayotte Capécia's novel *Je suis martiniquaise* (1948) and *La négresse blanche* (1950) would also have fallen into oblivion if it were not for Fanon who revived this author in his analysis of what he

---

[56] Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora. Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 119. See also: Jennifer Anne Boittin, "In Black and White: Gender, Race Relations and the Nardal Sisters in Interwar Paris," *French Colonial History* 6 (2005): 123-127.

[57] Quoted by Denean Sharpley-Whiting in *Negritude women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17.

[58] Valérie Orlando, "The Politics of Race and Patriarchy in *Claire-Solange âme africaine* by Suzanne Lacascade," *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature* 21, no.1 (2005): 118-134.

considered a typically feminine racial alienation.[59] Michèle Lacrosil, who was born in Guadeloupe and moved to Paris in the 1950s to be a high school teacher, published three novels (*Sapotille et le Serin d'argile*, 1960; *Cajou*, 1961; *Demain Jab-Herma*, 1967) under the prestigious Gallimard name. Married to a renowned scientist, Henri Galliard, and being close friends with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, she would have had access to publication. But the exact conditions of her publication and the sudden cessation of her writing career will have to be researched further as very little information is available on her biography.[60]

From Haiti, Marie Chauvet, who had already reached a certain notoriety in the literary circles of her island as a novelist and poet, would have probably gained an international celebrity, if the manuscript of her trilogy, sent to Simone de Beauvoir, and published in 1968 by Gallimard, had not been bought out by her husband and prohibited from further printing for fear of political repression against her family members.[61] Only Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972) would be recognized as a masterpiece of Caribbean Literature.

2. From an editorial nonsuccess to a best-seller

Maryse Condé's context for her first publications occurred, nevertheless, at a moment when editors were more willing to publish authors from the former colonies

[59] Myriam Cottias and Madeleine Dobbie, *Relire Mayotte Capécia : Une femme des Antilles dans l'espace colonial français (1916-1955)* (Paris : Armand Colin, 2012) : 24-23.
[60] Robert Smith, "Michèle Lacrosil: Novelist with a color complex," *The French Review* 47, no.4: 783-790.
[61] Kaima L. Glover, "'Black' Radicalism in Haiti and the Disorderly Feminine: the Case of Marie Vieux Chauvet," *Small Axe* 40 (march 2013): 14.

and when feminist movements also gained recognition in the literary field. Overall, in the 1970s, the normalization of women's access to literary careers was also a result of women's access to university degrees that served as the main pathway toward an intellectual profession, made possible by democratization of academic institutions in France at the end of World War II.

Born in the aftermath of May 1968, the rise of the Women's Liberation movement supported women's entry into the literary field, particularly through the development of specialized publishing editions (such as "L'édition des femmes"), special collections in mainstream publishing houses and the development of specialized publications.[62] Some women writers from the overseas departments were involved or close to feminist struggles, whether intellectually or militantly. For example, Jacqueline Manicom, a midwife by profession Marxist and militant advocate of proabortion and contraception rights, was an activist in the organization "Choisir". She published a novel, *Mon examen de blanc* in 1972, and an autobiographical essay *La Graine* in 1974, before ending her life in 1976.[63] Françoise Vergès, in her case study of forced abortions and sterilization in La Réunion, demonstrates how the feminist movement, more particularly the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF), mobilized feminist issues within a universal *modus operandi*, (i.e. mainstream European conception) grounded in a refusal to interrogate the imperial and colonial

[62] For an overview of women publishing history in France since the 1950's, see : Bibia Pavard, *Les éditions des femmes. Histoire des premières années 1972-1979* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2005). Delphine Naudier, "La reconnaissance sociale et littéraire des femmes écrivains depuis les années 1950" in *Intellectuelles. Du Genre en histoire des intellectuels,* ed. Nicole Racine et Michel Trebitsch (Brussels: Editions Complexe 2004): 191-210.
[63] Christiane P. Mackward, Madeleine Cottenet-Hage, *Dictionnaire littéraire des femmes de langue française : De Marie de France à Marie Ndiaye* (Paris : Khartala, 1996) : 398-400.

history of France and its consequences in the production of racialized modes of domination against women.[64] Issues pertaining to women from overseas departments were consequently not part of the agenda within the feminist movement as it developed in Paris or hexagonal France, and its fight against patriarchal modes of domination did not take into account its colonial and racialized component. If Delphine Naudier's study shows class relations at work within the feminist context of publication[65], Vergès' analysis helps us understand why a majority of Caribbean women writers have built their career outside of the feminist movement and they are usually reluctant to publicly claim an affiliation with it or describe themselves as feminists.[66]

Condé, in particular, stresses the fact that Black women voices were not heard. Although Condé completed a doctoral degree and published several critical essays on Caribbean literature, she would not be offered a position in a French university, or in Martinique or Guadeloupe (where she lived for a few years in the 1980s), which would encourage her to pursue an academic career in the United-States.

> C'était une époque où la voix de la Femme n'était pas entendue, surtout la femme noire, il n'y avait pas de place pour elle. Et nous, on acceptait ; bizarrement, on n'essayait pas. Par exemple, au lieu de me battre pour être accepté en France, je suis partie à New York, oui la fuite, le choix d'un autre destin paraissait inévitable.
> ***Les femmes n'avaient aucune place et vous n'aviez aucun lien avec les mouvements féministes ?***
> Aucun, aucun
>
> It was a time where the woman's voice wasn't heard, especially that of the Black woman, there was no place for her. And us, we accepted this; bizarrely, we didn't try. For example, instead

[64] Françoise Vergès, *Le ventre des femmes. Capitalisme, racialization, Féminisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2017), 167-212.
[65] Delphine Naudier, " Sociologie d'un miracle éditorial dans un contexte féministe," *Genèse, Sciences Sociales et Histoires,* 3 (2005): 67-87.
[66] "Are you a feminist? – I have been asked this question a hundred times, and I don't know what it means exactly, so I must not be a feminist" (Pfaff, *Conversation with Maryse Condé,* 29).

> of fighting to be accepted in France, I left for New York, yes, avoidance, the choice of another destiny seemed inevitable.
> ***Women had no place, and you had no connection with feminist movements?***
> None at all, none at all.[67]

Condé's introduction to the literary field was hence through the circles of postcolonial African writers and did not have any link to any feminist movement. Her work at *Présence Africaine* could have opened easy access to publication. However, the publishing company rejected her manuscript as the content was too critical of the post-independence African nations:

> "Parce que mon livre n'a pas eu l'air de plaire, il était trop critique, Mr Diop n'aimait pas mon image de l'Afrique. Il n'aimait pas ce que je décrivais : la pauvreté, la misère, la corruption, les inégalités donc *Présence* n'en voulait pas."
>
> "My book didn't have an appealing air, it was too critical, Mr. Diop didn't like my image of Africa. He didn't like at all everything that I was describing: poverty, misery, corruption, inequality, so *Présence* didn't want my book." [68]

Her novel and its radical content did not fit the standards of the mainstream literary canon of their editorial policy. It is through the patronage of Alexis Adotevi, whom she met at *Présence Africaine*, that she found a publisher: the publisher *10/18*, managed by Christian Bourgeois. *10/18*, specializing in a pocket format and more open to experimental literature, had made its name through the publication of the new intellectual avant-garde (from novels of "le nouveau roman" to essays of political theory and the social sciences to the new generation of poststructuralist philosophers close to Marxist movements).[69] The publisher *10/18* also participated in establishing

[67] Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Sarena Tien, August 2017.
[68] Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Sarena Tien, August 2017.
[69] Anne-Céline Cohen-Brisac, *Des livres de poches pour un public intellectuel : Evolution de la collection 10/18.* Mémoire Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Bibliothécaire, 14-18, https://www.enssib.fr/bibliotheque-numerique/documents/63013-livres-de-proche-pour-un-public-intellectuel-evolution-de-la-collection-1018-des.pdf.

the new wave of feminist women writers in the literary field. The collection "Feminin Futur" under the direction of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, who released a few titles before the founding of their own publishing house *L'Editions des femmes*.[70] Concurrently, Adotevi, a philosopher, of Beninian origins had created with anthropology professor Robert Jaulin another collection within this publishing company: the collection "La voie/voix des autres." Composed of ten titles in total, it included the first novel of Hampate Bâ and Mongo Beti.[71]A former student of Louis Althusser in philosophy and anthropology, Adotevi was himself known as a critic of *Negritude* [72] and liked Condé's novel for its "iconoclast tone".[73]

Although, as previously mentioned, there is no link between Condé and the contemporary feminist women writers of her time, and her novel does not take a militant feminist stance, it nevertheless narrates a story from a feminine point of view that inscribes a strong political critique through the sexual development of its main female protagonist. *Heremakhonon* follows the doomed sexual relationships of a young woman from Guadeloupe who comes to an unknown country in Africa as a teacher in philosophy with the intention to reconnect with her African heritage. Undergoing an existential crisis, she has difficulty situating amongst her African origin, her Guadeloupean socio-cultural background from the black middle class and her French identity and intellectual heritage. Her relationship with Ibrahima Sory, an aristocratic man or "nègre avec aïeux" who is also the Interior Secretary of State,

[70] Cohen-Brisac, *Des livres de poches,* 39-40.
[71] Cohen-Brisac, *Des livres de poches,* 41,
[72] Stanislas Adotevi, *Negritudes et négrologues* (Paris: Editions 10/18), 1972.
[73] Maryse Condé, *Mets et Merveilles* (Paris : JC Lattès, 2015), 73.

places her in an increasingly complex situation, as he orders a severe political repression of students and professors who went on strike in the high school where she teaches philosophy. A passive witness to the dramatic events, though well aware of the contradictions of her position by continuing to see the Secretary of State, she ends up fleeing the country and returning to Paris.

Although access to a first publication occurred with ease, *Heremakhonon* did not receive a lot of attention in France. Ignored by the press (Condé states that the specialized newspaper *Afrique Asie* refused to publish a critical note), the critics came from her close circle and by word of mouth. Provocative in tone, the novel generally displeased. On the one hand, *Heremakhonon* did not fit into the category of "literature engagée", instead pointing out its limits. By illustrating the challenges and difficulties of a newly independent postcolonial African nation, or at least revealing the contradictions of its evolving situation, it questioned an ideal vision of Africa as purported by the founding fathers of *Negritude* and was not seen as "politically correct" among the circle of her left-wing Marxist friends.

In Martinique, a more moralistic reading denounced the sexual behaviors and the crude language of the main protagonist. Maryse Condé recalls a hostile reception directly targeting the sexual identity of the author: "An article in *Le naif*[74] signed by someone whose name I will not mention, called me "a voyeur and a whore," added that "an odor of sperm could be smelled" in the book, and ended up comparing me to Mayotte Capécia."[75] By conflating the author with narrator, this virulent misogynistic

[74] Magazine published in Martinique
[75] Pfaff, *Conversation with Maryse Condé*, 46.

attack reveals how the question of gender was mobilized to disqualify the novel as immoral and relegate it to a genre specifically feminine: the autobiographical genre. Literary practices of women have usually been reduced to autobiography and romance, as those two genres seemed to correspond to a certain stereotypical representation of feminine nature: women love telling stories about their life, themselves, their hopes, emotions and sentimental lives.[76] This conception of "une littérature feminine" has led to the homogeny of literary practices by women under its smallest common denominator: sex, which would constitute the main criteria of recognition and contribute in this way to its inferior status of women's literature. This inferior position is the result of two factors reinforcing each other: an established literary field dominated by a masculine representation contributing to the relegation of women to a literature of secondary status, and conversely the difficulty women writers faced in questioning dominating literary canons, critiquing masculine domination, and exiting this model of exclusion. By reducing the novel to the sexual gender of the author, the critique obscures political, literary, or aesthetic aspects of Conde's work to focus on what Toril Moi calls the "*personality topos*".[77] In that case, it is not the author's physical appearance but rather her morality which affect the reading of the work with the implication that "whatever a woman says, or writes, or thinks is less important and less interesting than what she *is*,"[78]

> "Je découvris que l'écrivain, surtout si elle est une femme, afin de protéger sa réputation ne doit peindre que des parangons de vertue"[79]

[76] Jennifer Milligan, *The Forgotten Generation: French Women Writers of the Inter-War Period* (Oxford : Berg Publishers, 1997), 70.
[77] Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir,The making of an intellectual woman* (Oxford : Blackwell, 1994), 78.
[78] Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir,* 78.
[79] Condé, *La vie sans fard,* 317.

> "I discovered that the writer, especially if she's a woman, should only portray paragons of virtue so as to safeguard her reputation."[80]

Twenty years earlier, Mayotte Capécia had been accused by Frantz Fanon of "whitening" the race, a behavior that relates, according to him, to a racial alienation typically feminine. In Maryse Condé's case, Veronica, the female protagonist of *Heremakhonon* returns to France and to her former lover, thereby encouraging Condé's detractors to accuse her of being an "assimilationist." In addition, this commentator did not take into consideration the innovative writing process and the narrator's use of irony as a way to express her subjectivity, which would eventually attract the interest of the postcolonial and feminist academic scholars in the United States twenty years later. Veronica expresses herself through negative statements: a distancing process to remove herself from racial/ class/ gender stereotypes that overtakes and conditions all her social, sentimental, and sexual relationships. If she voices those clichés (from white colonial stereotypes to the black male to the feminist clichés), her point is not to erase them or to invalidate their truths. It is rather to put them on hold or to extract herself from them to liberate herself. This liberation, however, is thought of in negative terms.[81] She situates herself in a position of uncertainty or ambiguity while maintaining a sharp sense of awareness.[82]

---

[80] Condé, *What is Africa to me*, 274.

[81] Natalie Melas, "Témoignages de la femme somnambule: l'ironie du Postcolonial au féminin," in *Genres et Postcolonialisme. Dialogues transcontinentaux*, ed. Anne Emmanuelle Berger et Eleni Varikas (Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines, 2011), 126-127.

[82] See for example Véronica's claims where she disavows being a "Mayotte Capécia" or a "feminist" of any kind : "Et que tous ces males noirs que me présentait ma famille me faisait horreur. Pourquoi il me faisait horreur ? Pas parce qu'ils étaient noirs. Absurde ! Je ne suis pas une Mayotte Capécia. Ah non, pas mon souci d'éclaircir la race ! Je le jure …" (Condé, *En attendant le bonheur Heremakhonon*, 55). [" Véronica, the main protagonist, is also highly aware of her anti-feminist stance : "Non je ne me faisais pas Marilisse, bonne blanchisseuse. J'aimais et c'est tout. Une femme qui aime n'est-ce pas toujours Marilisse? Que les feministes me lapident si elles le veulent." (Condé, *En attendant le bonheur*

Maryse Condé acknowledges that her own experiences in Africa inspired the novel. Some elements are autobiographical (the social origin of the narrator, the independent journey of a young Caribbean teacher, the strike in the high school and the political repression). More precisely, the novel is an account of the social world that was built from the social experiences that Maryse Conde lived, filtered through her own imagination and aesthetic dispositions, and critics would later define her novel as fictional autobiography or an autobiographical fiction.[83] Here, the analysis of Bernard Lahire is again useful: like Flaubert writing about his character Frédéric, writing about Véronica allows Maryse Condé "de faire travailler sa problématique existencielle," that is to say she objectifies a potential version of herself or creates "an avatar" (the character of Véronica that she could have been), [84] allowing her to take greater distance from herself than if she had written an autobiography. It is a way to experiment with the transposition of reality through the infinite possibilities of fiction, giving her story broader symbolic significance to emblematize the political debates faced by the newly independent African nations.[85]

Heremakhonon, 39) "I was not doing a Marilisse. I was in love. That's all. A woman in love, isn't she always a Marilisse? Let the feminists stone me if they want to!" (Condé, *Heremakhonon,* 17)

[83] Sarah Mosher "Maryse Condé's Heremakhonon as Fictitious Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction" *Journal of Haitian Studies* 16, no.1 (Spring 2010): 146.

[84] Bernard Lahire, *Ce qu'ils vivent, ce qu'ils écrivent: mises en scène littéraire du social et expériences socialisatrices des écrivains* (Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines du social, 2011), 17.

[85] Condé explains this point in detail: "Je n'arrêtais pas de corriger ce qui allait devenir mon roman *Heremakhonon.* A mon insu, le texte avait changé de nature. Ce n'était plus un simple récit inspiré de mes expériences personnelles. J'étais devenue plus ambitieuse. Je m'étais mise à gommer les spécificités qui auraient pu rattacher mes héros à des modèles simplement humains et identifiables. J'entendais donner au choix de l'héroïne, Véronica, une portée symbolique plus large. Ibrahima Sory, le "Nègre avec aïeux" et Saliou, le militant, devenait les symboles de deux Afriques qui se combattaient : celle des dictateurs et celle des patriotes. En bref, celle de Sékou Touré et celle d'Hamilcar Cabral. Une telle ambition éclaire une phrase qui m'a si souvent été reprochée parce que mal comprise, celle de Véronica, maîtresse de Ibrahima Sory : "Je me suis trompée d'aïeux. J'ai cherché mon salut parmi des assassins." (Condé *La vie sans fard,* 329) / "I was constantly correcting what was to become my novel *Heremakhonon.* Without knowing it, the text had changed in nature –it was no longer a simple story

In the 1980s, Léopold Sédar Senghor entrance into the French Academy created a new interest for African literature among publishing companies in Paris. During this period of economic rationalization and concentration, special collections or series multiplied, such as "Monde noir poche" from Hatier, or "Lettres noires" from Karthala (a literary collection that would later be abandoned for a focus on social and human sciences). Those labels purported a certain ambiguity, as they would openly display a racialized orientation without a strong political militancy, contrary to *Présence Africaine*.[86] They are also part of a larger trend in the commodification and marketing of "exotic" cultural value for mainly metropolitan audiences.[87]

Through her contact with Daniel Radford, a native of Guadeloupe and the director of the collection "Chemins d'identité" at Robert Lafont, (which published about ten titles from a variety of authors, from West African countries or from the Caribbean),[88] Condé was able to publish her second novel, *Une saison à Rihatta* (1981), which did not receive more attention than the first (*Heremakhonon*). The publishing company, however, was able to financially afford an editorial shortfall. It is only with the publication of her novel *Ségou* (published in English as *The Children of Segu)* in two volumes (*La murailles de terre,* 1984*; La terre en miette,* 1985*)* that

---

inspired by my experiences. I had become more ambitious –I had started to erase the particulars which would have connected my characters to human and identifiable models. I now intended giving Véronica's choice a wider symbolic significance. Ibrahima Sory, the 'Nigger with ancestors', and Saliou, the militant, became the symbols of two warring factions of Africa: the dictators and the patriots. In other words, Sékou Touré versus Amílcar Cabral. Such a motive explains the phrase I have often been blamed for because it has been misunderstood, when Véronica, Ibrahima Sory's mistress, says: "I looked for myself in the wrong place. In the arms of an assassin.' (Condé, *What is Africa to me*, 285-86.)

[86] Ducournau, *La fabrique des classiques africains,* 141.

[87] For an insightful analysis on exoticism and the production and consumption of postcolonial cultural commodities, see Graham Huggan, *The Postocolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[88] Ducournau, *La fabrique des classiques africains,* 141.

would lead her to commercial success. After lengthy research on "une thèse d'état"[89] on the Mandingo oral traditions, Condé converted her materials to fiction in agreement with the publisher who offered her a contract and commissioned the work. The novel recounts three generations of a family from the high peak of the Bambara kingdom to its fall at the start of French colonization. *Ségou* appears as a novelty, the first historical novel on Africa written in French, while following the conventional writing style of a saga. 300,000 copies of the first volume were sold the first year of its publication and fewer for the second,[90] allowing the author to achieve a certain level of media coverage. She appears for example in *Apostrophes*, a popular French talk show hosted by Bernard Pivot. *Ségou* was an important step in Condé's career. It brought her literary consecration in France and abroad (the novel was translated in a dozen languages). However, she would later decide to draw away from a commissioned genre intended for the general public in order "to experiment with other narrative techniques and writing style".[91]

Maryse Condé's career as a writer in the 1970s in France later in her life. Prior to her literary work, her professional occupations (as a teacher in West African countries, a journalist and a literary critic) and the accumulation of cultural and social capital converged allowing her access to being published in a context more open to women writers and writers from Africa and the African diaspora. Despite being a pioneer, she nevertheless occupied an ambivalent position that first placed her in the

[89] A "thèse d'Etat" was before the 1984 reform doctoral research required to obtain full professorship in the French university.
[90] Pfaff, *Conversations,* 55.
[91] Pfaff, *Conversations,* 54.

margins of the racialized and gendered borders of the Parisian literary field. To be recognized as a writer, she had to satisfy the demands of the editorial market that still bore traces of dominant masculine/political norms and commercial expectations. Only the success of *Ségou* in France enabled her to assert her aesthetic innovative choices and to occupy a more prominent position in the literary field. *Heremakhonon,* whose unsold copies had been destroyed, would later be republished in 1988 by Seghers, when Maryse Condé reached a certain fame at a national and international level and would be able to pursue a career as a professor in the American academia.

Her initial ambivalent position will work to her advantage and is in fact the precursor of the ethical and decolonial turn that Simone Schwarz-Bart first initiated. Indeed, in the later part of her career, Maryse Condé will keep insisting on her singular creativity as a writer, on her artistic independence vis-à-vis any political cause and unaligned with any literary movement, while honoring the voices of those who had been silenced in history.[92] In a now famous essay, Condé as a critic calls for a "disorder" of the well-established "order" of a Caribbean literature that would follow a male dominant Sartrian model after World War II in a context of decolonization and Marxist influence.[93] Sartre posits that the individual freedom of the writer is at the basis of his/her political engagement in literature. However, Condé points out the difficulties of dissociating the political vocation of literature outside a prescriptive framework regarding the role of the writer and the function of writing. The Sartrian model for

[92] See for example her novels *Moi Tituba Socière Noires de Salem* (Paris : Mercure de France, 1986)/ *I, Tituba Black witch of Salem,* trans. Richard Philcox (New York : Caraf Book, 1992) and *Victoire des saveurs et des mots* (2006)/ *Victoire, My Mother's Mother,* trans. Richard Philcox.

[93] Maryse Condé, "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer," *Yale French Studies,* no.83 (1993): 151-165.

Condé restrains the writer's creative freedom. Condé questions the aesthetic and political limits of a literature intended to represent the people of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Haiti in a prophetic way.[94] By associating the function of literature with a political narrative of the emancipation of a male hero, this literature recreates a mythic vision of the people that does not leave any space for an intimate and subjective perspective. She also warns against a narrow definition of "Creolité" that would restrict the use of Creole to folklore and inhibit the writer's creativity.[95] Going beyond the defense of her own independent position in the literary field, she reasserts the power of transgression of female voices in Caribbean Literature and a true ethics for the "art of representation."[96]

[94] Condé, "Order, Disorder, Freedom," 152-158.
[95] Ibid. 159-160.
[96] Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual, 13.*

CHAPITRE 3

WRITING AS CROSSING THE MANGROVE – GISELE PINEAU'S VERSION[1]

Writing, confronting words to recover one's body is a matter of survival for the female Guadeloupean author, Gisèle Pineau. Words that have been lost and murdered in the silence of a story or history, words coming out of pain, violence, repression and abuse, words condemned to death and inexistence. For Pineau, writing is like "the crossing of a mangrove" that allows the body to breathe and move. This "corps à corps" with writing is a bio-graphy in the etymological sense of the word ["bio" in ancient Greek meaning "life"; and "graphy" from the Latin "graphia" meaning "writing"]. Bio-graphy, as the account or record of life, which is the history of not only an individual life, but also a history whose body has yet to emerge and find its shape in the writing to come, or the flesh of the country ("la chair du Pays"). Literature as bio-graphy is a place of self-reflection of life, as much as the site where life reenacts itself. Bio-graphy merges with literature, blurring the fixed boundaries of fiction and "real" life, the living and the dead, the visible and invisible world (the voice of the author and the voice of the ancestors), the individual and the collective.

In this chapter, I will explore Pineau's approach to writing through a close analysis of her trajectory and position in the literary field. Gisèle Pineau became famous in the

[1] The image of the Mangrove comes from the interview I had with Gisèle Pineau on May 10, 2017 in Marie-Galante (an island part of Guadeloupe) where she lives (see the excerpt at the beginning of section III). The title of the chapter is also reminiscent of Maryse Condé's novel set up in Guadeloupe *Traversée de la Mangrove* (1989) */Crossing the Mangrove* (1995).

1990s with her first novel *La Grande drive des Esprits*[2]. Since then, she has published ten novels, two autobiographical memoirs and numerous fictional books for children and teenagers. Recipient of many literary prizes in France and Guadeloupe, Pineau stands with Maryse Condé and Simone Schwarz-Bart as one of the leading feminine voices of French Caribbean literature. As with her predecessors, I will examine her ambivalent position in the literary field, in the margins of the movement of "La Créolité". If her becoming a writer testifies to a vocation and a sense of emergency (writing as a survival, as crossing the mangrove), it comes to Pineau (like her predecessors) with a firm position of independence, outside the rigid categories of any political or feminist agenda. This precursory perspective of writing questions the idea of "the death of the author",[3] while calling for a relational and decolonial approach to writing and reading.

I. Social trajectory of Gisèle Pineau

1. Growing up in a Guadeloupean middle-class family in Paris

Gisèle Pineau has traced her family history through research in the departmental archives of Guadeloupe. Her ancestor who gave her the name "Pineau,"

[2] Gisèle Pineau, *La Grande Drive des Esprits* (Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 1993)/ *The Drifting of Spirits*, trans. Michael Dash (London: Quartet, 1999).
[3] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 49-55.

a French name indeed,[4] was a woman named Angélique, born into slavery and later liberated by her master and common-law husband. Her fictionalized story appears in Gisèle Pineau's memoirs, *Mes quatre femmes*.[5] Angélique was born in 1792. Her father was unknown, and her mother worked as a domestic servant (a cook and housemaid) for Jean-Baptiste Pineau, a landowner in the trois rivières area (South of the lower island of Guadeloupe) and his wife Véronique Pineau a free woman of color. Their son, Jean-Féréol Pineau" had five children with Angelique, who were also born into slavery following the status of the mother. Jean-Féréol Pineau emancipated them along with Angelique, on June 8, 1837. Upon his death, 10 days later, Angelique as a free woman inherited his lands and possessions. The name and the wealth could then be passed down to her.

Family background, social Advancement and French assimilation through the French army

Gisèle Pineau's family is a telling example of how the two World Wars impacted her family experience and the collective history of the French Caribbean in the particular context of her family history and collectivity worked in terms of social advancement.

Gisèle Pineau's grandfather, Asdrubal Pineau, descendant of Angelique Pineau, was a survivor of World War I. For the men of his generation, joining the

[4] According to a genealogy website, the name Pineau is common in the West part of France. Often associated with the sweet wine "Pineau des Charentes", it etymologically refers to the Pine wood (whether a tree or a little wood). https://www.geneanet.org/nom-de-famille/PINEAU.
[5] Pineau Gisèle. *Mes quatre femmes.* Philippe Ray, 2007, 143-185.

French forces in 1914 was not a deliberate choice but required through conscription by the French Republic. He was one of the 6,345 soldiers from Guadeloupe sent to the front, among the 16,880 soldiers in total for Guadeloupe, Martinique and Guyane in 1915 and the 500,000 men conscripted from the French colonial empire to be part of the French army deployed on the European battlefields,[6] known as *troupes indigènes*.[7] Since the third Republic, the political representatives of Martinique and Guadeloupe had been relentless advocates for the extension of the military service as part of an egalitarian demand for full recognition of citizenship. The postponement of such an extension, until the French army urgently needed new forces that the colonial empire was able to provide, appeared as a denigration, the refusal of an honor to serve France and be part of the national army.[8] Free citizens since the abolition of slavery, the noble engagement to defend the "motherland" meant the fulfillment of the assimilation process and equal treatment under the law. To fulfill the military duty stems from the aspiration to be considered a fully French citizen and be included under the principle of military service as any of the French men as citizens. But such a request was not

[6] Jacques Dumont, "Conscription antillaise et citoyenneté revendiquée au tournant de la première guerre mondiale," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 92, no. 4 (2006): 114.
[7] Soldiers from the *troupes indigènes* included men from the entire French colonial empire: North Africa, West Africa, Indochina, Madagascar. See Richard Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918,* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 27. In terms of status, soldiers from the "old colonies" (Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane and La Réunion) were since the abolition of slavery not imperial subjects but French citizens. The decision to incorporate them with the colonial troops stationed in North Africa revealed the fragility of their civil status and defeated the expectations to be fully recognized as French citizens, not colonial subjects, and to be treated on an equal footage. See Dumont, "Conscription antillaise," 115; See also Frantz Fanon who laments the lack of solidarity among soldiers in the colonial army and denounces the complex of superiority and distinction between the Antilleans and the Black "Africans" (Fanon, *Peau noire Masques blancs*, 20)
[8] Jacques Dumont. "La figure de l'ennemi. Les Antilles et la Première Guerre mondiale," *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de Guadeloupe* 168 (May-Aug. 2014), 137. https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/bshg/2014-n168-bshg01537/1026849ar/.

without difficulties or hesitations from the French army and authorities. Beyond the technicalities regarding the administrative application of military services in overseas territories, the reluctance to normalize the military law confirms the prevailing racism toward men of color and their status as second-zone citizens.[9] In the end, however, the payment of the "blood tax" was required during World War I, soldiers from Guadeloupe and Martinique were not only responding to a patriotic impetus like any young soldiers from the French hexagonal territory. The pride and prestige associated with military heroism meant also gaining their place as part of the "civilized" humanity, to prove that "tears and blood are of the same color," to quote a news' article of that time.[10] The participation in World War I served later as an argument to justify and claim greater assimilation.

After a head injury during World War I, Asdrubal Pineau was demobilized early, and lived as a farmer in Guadeloupe. He married Julia Roman, a young black woman who was working as "an amarreuse" (women who tied up the canes behind men who cut them) in sugar-cane plantations. Born February 3, 1898, Julia Roman was the daughter of a seamstress, Elvire Roman[11]. At the age of six, she had already started to work in the garden picking up fruit and vegetables and caring for domestic animals. She later worked on sugar cane and banana plantations. Destined to physical and manual labor to support her family, she never went to school and did not formally

[9] Dumont, "Conscription antillaise," 104.
[10] La France coloniale, 16 avril 1915 "Le sang des noirs". Quoted by Dumont, "La figure de l'ennemi," footnote 95.
[11] This information comes from the administrative document found by the author at the city hall of Capesterre Belle-Eau. Julia's story appears in this autobiographical fiction: *Mes quatre femmes* 59-104 and *L'Exil selon Julia,* Stock, 1993. In this first autobiographical fiction by Gisèle Pineau, she narrates her growing up in Paris with her grandmother Man Ya and her return to the Caribbean as a teenager.

learn French nor how to read and write. She married and had three sons. Her second son, Barthélémy Pineau (Gisèle's father), was 16 years old when the Second World War broke out. He was a carpenter's apprentice at the prestigious "lycée Carnot", the first public high school in Guadeloupe which opened in 1883. He joined the movement of "Dissidence" responding to the call of General De Gaulle to fight with the Free French Force. Later he entered the military. From 1940 to 1943, Guadeloupe and Martinique were subject to the authoritarian law of the Vichy regime. Governor Sorin of Guadeloupe and his counterpart in Martinique, Henri Bressol (replaced in 1941 by Yves Nicol), aligned their policies with the government of Marechal Pétain, and through the colonial law, enforced its legislation including the most antisemitic laws.[12] The suppression of republican institutions and the right to vote, coupled with authoritative methods and fierce repression, appeared in the context of the Caribbean as the return to a well-known colonial paternalism and in the collective imagination of the slavery era. Emboldened by a culture that for centuries had to invent and reinvent the art of resistance, from a wide range of concealment tactics and silent rebellion to open and armed opposition, the population showed exceptional creativity in defying the Vichy regime and surviving the shortages resulting from the war economy amidst British and American blockades.[13] From the minute refusal of the people to show symbolic alliance to the regime, to the well-known defiance of censorship by the literary review "*Tropiques*," led by Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, Aristide Maugé and René Menil, to open military actions, more and more people, men and women,

[12] See: Eric T. Jennings, "La dissidence aux Antilles (1940-1943)," *Vingtième siècle, revue d'histoire* 68 (Oct.-Dec. 2000): 55-71.
[13] See Edouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 310.

opposed the Vichy authorities. Several protests and military actions took place and were violently suppressed by the police and army until the collapse of the regime in the islands and their rallying to the Free French Forces led by De Gaulle in July 1943.[14]

The dissident movement resulted in the departure of 4,000 to 5,000 young men (among them Frantz Fanon) who reached with the help of boat smugglers, the English islands of La Dominique and Saint Lucie.[15] From there, they joined the Free French Army after military training in the United States, Canada or Great Britain. Collectively, they were responding to the call of the General Charles De Gaulle, surnamed "General Micro" in Guadeloupe,[16] as embodied by his powerful message of freedom to rally the liberation forces led from North Africa. Richard Burton draws a parallel between the dissident movement and the experience of runaway maroons who fled slavery.[17] Indeed, among the diverse and complex motivations behind the movement of dissidence,[18] the political and ideological reasons seemed decisive: the fears of "the return of the repressed", the ghosts of slavery that the Vichy reactionary policies and alliance to the Nazi ultra-racist ideology revived. In that context, De Gaulle symbolically embodied the fight for freedom against racism. Popular rumors, such as the one quoted in the memoirs of "L'amiral Robert" likens De Gaulle to a

[14] In May 1943, after a soccer match, a pacifist protest took the streets of Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe. The confrontation with the police forces caused the death of a 17-year-old men, Serge Balguy, which raised another wave of protests (Jennings, "La dissidence aux Antilles," 62).
[15] Ibid. 65.
[16] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, May 10, 2017.
[17] Richard Burton. "*Vichysme et Vichystes à la Martinique," Les Cahiers du CERAG* 34 (feb. 1978): 2-3.
[18] For a detailed account, see Jennings,"La dissidence aux Antilles," 64-69.

black general like Toussaint Louverture.[19] This reading of the Second World War tragedy from the particular Caribbean historical point of view shed light on the fact that Europe was not immune to racist violence and brutality implemented in its colonial territories; what Aimé Césaire will call "the boomerang effect" in the *Discourse on Colonialism.*[20] To rally the dissidents and to evoke General De Gaulle was to rally the fight for liberty and equality and to be again at the vanguard of revolutionary ideals that the Caribbean took on and extended. It proved the essential contribution and support that Caribbean people brought to the democratic world.

From the point of view of the French authorities nevertheless, Caribbean, and African soldiers' exploits and acts of bravery were wiped out from the collective memory after the war in a context of anti-colonial unrest. The silence and absence of celebration regarding their contribution was justified as a way of preventing any hopes of independence.[21] Euzhan Palcy's documentary, "The Journey of the Dissidents," released in 2006 pays homage to and shines light on those men, who for a long time remained in the shadows and like their fathers from the previous generation during World War I, had to endure racism in the French army. Among them, Gisèle Pineau's father gives his testimony.[22] His interview illuminates both the patriotic values that

---

[19] Quoted by Jennings,"La dissidence aux Antilles," 65.
[20] Aimé Césaire denounces the spiritual and moral failures of Europe demonstrating that colonialism decivilizes the colonizer, "deshumanizes even the most civilized man". He explains how Hitler applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the "coolies" of India and the "niggers" of Africa" in *Discourse on colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 36. See also: Michel Rothberg, "Un choc en retour" in *Multidirectional memory, remembering the Haulocaust in the age of decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 66-110.
[21] Julien Toureille, "La dissidence dans les Antilles françaises: une mémoire à préserver (1945-2011)," *Revue d'Histoire des armées* 270 (2013): 68-78.
[22] https://vimeo.com/122868834.

soldiers may have demonstrated toward France as a way to assert their Frenchness and the right for greater assimilation (which will take place with the transition to the status of Department in 1946) but also the complex contradictory position they had while wearing a French uniform while being Black.

Barthelemy Pineau claims that he went to war because of French classic literature. The theater play *Horace* by Corneille would have prompted him to honor and fight for the patriotic values, a telling example of how highly valued French canonical authors were for this generation of men educated in the French school system, and the affirmation of belonging to French culture and national values. From his experience on the ground in Germany, he tells the touching story of his encounter with a German soldier, his first prisoner whom he might have killed. Instead, the German man initiated a conversation, asking Barthelemy Pineau to bring a picture of him to his wife and two children as a reassurance that he was alive. Mr. Pineau asserts from that day that his German's descendants would tell the story to his family, and from this day his descendants will not fear any Black person. This anecdote humanizes the experience of the war. It also demonstrates the subversive actions Black soldiers undertook to lead their own ideological fight against racism preserving human dignity, beyond the fight against the Nazi regime and within the French army itself.[23]

After World War II, Gisèle Pineau's father served in the wars of decolonization: first in Indochina, then he was later sent to Senegal, Congo-

[23] It was a groundbreaking experience for Frantz Fanon whose experience of the racism within the French army will be decisive in his later theorization of race and colonial oppression.

Brazzaville, and French Polynesia. His experience with World War II gave him the opportunity for a military career of which he always felt proud:

> "C'était sa voie. Il était très fier. (…) Mon père n'a jamais été déçu par la France, il a beaucoup voyagé avec la France. Il a fait des guerres. Il a été au Vietnam, à l'époque c'était l'Indochine. Il a fait la guerre d'Indochine. Là c'était avant ma naissance. C'était tous les jeunes des colonies françaises qui servaient la France partout dans le monde et permettait à cette France de maintenir les gens sous son emprise. Etre dans la grande famille de l'empire, l'empire français partout dans le monde, la gloire de cette France, servir tout ça. Et les peuples qui étaient dominés ont dû se battre pour arracher leur indépendance."
>
> "It was his path. He was very proud of his career, he fought in the colonies. (…) My father was never disappointed by France, he travelled a lot with France. He fought in wars. He went to Vietnam, which, at the time, was Indochina. He made war to Indochina. This was before I was born. It was all the young people from the French colonies that served France everywhere in the world and allowed France to keep its grip on people. To be in the great family of the empire, the French empire everywhere in the world, the glory of France—to serve all of this. And the peoples that were dominated had to fight in order to seize their independence."[24]

Gisèle Pineau's family, from her mother's side, were slightly more affluent. Her maternal grandmother was literate and had a grocer's shop in the small town of Goyaves. Her maternal grandfather was the manager of a sugar cane plantation and owned a transportation business affording him a relatively comfortable and prosperous life. Both, however, went through economic difficulty, which altered the trajectory of social ascension. According to Gisèle Pineau's account, her mother pursued marriage as a means of social mobility. After a few years in school, she was working in a haberdashery when she met Gisèle's father and married him promptly. She would have crossed the color line, seduced by the military uniform, the social prestige attached to it, the possibilities of traveling to France, and around the world along with the promise of social advancement.

[24] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.

Wearing the French military uniform, in addition to the chance to emigrate to France, for Gisèle Pineau's parents and this generation appears as a fulfillment of a dream, an aspiration in pursuit of the myth for France as the "civilized" nation. It was considered as a social promotion, and a privilege to provide for their children the experience of France and education in the French school system.

> "Mais, mes parents voulaient, nos parents voulaient que l'on soit instruit, qu'on évolue. Je crois qu'être militaire de carrière pour mon père c'était une promotion sociale aussi, le port de l'uniforme, l'armée française, vivre en France. Ma mère, elle adorait dire ça, 'la France, la France !'"
>
> "But my parents wanted us to be educated, to be evolved. I think that, for my father, to be a military person by calling was like a social promotion: to wear the uniform of the French army, to live in France. My mother, she loved to say this: 'France, ah… France!'"[25]

Gisèle Pineau was born in Paris in 1956 in a family of six children. In spite of her birthplace, the dedication, efforts and service of her family to France and French culture still did not grant her and her family "full citizenship."[26] The most degrading treatment occurred at school where Gisèle faced not only cruel mockery and ostracization from her schoolmates but also openly racist comments and lack of protection from the teachers. The stereotypical images of inferiority objectifying Gisèle from outside, express the fear and ignorance of a widely and openly racist colonial society in France. While negating her the right of belonging to the country she was born and lived, the insults associate her with the clichés of a mythical, "uncivilized" and undifferentiated Africa where she did not belong either. This hateful attitude reveals the lack of education regarding the colonial history of France, the

[25] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.
[26] Renée Larrier, "Sont-ils encore des gens de Guadeloupe?" *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 11, no. 1 and 2 (June 2008): 181.

contribution of people from Africa and the diaspora to the wealth and liberation of the French nation.

> "Je suis une petite fille, je suis sommée de survivre, de trouver moyen de survivre à la violence extérieure, parce que c'est le racisme. Je vais à l'école, on me traite de négresse, retourne en Afrique dans ta case en paille. Je n'ai pas d'amie. Je suis là, dépossédée de moi-même, c'est comme un oiseau qui ne peut pas ouvrir ses ailes. Je ne peux pas rire, parce que c'est tous les jours, mouton noir, négresse, va en Afrique. "
>
> "I am a little girl, and I am forced to survive, to find a way to survive to the external violence—because it's racism. I go to school and people call me a negress. They tell me: "Go back to your hut in Africa." I don't have any friend. Here I am, dispossessed of myself. It's like a bird that cannot open its wings. I cannot laugh since, every day, it's "black sheep," "negress," "go back to Africa."[27]

Her body unwelcomed, "stripped of herself" no matter how hard she tries to be accepted, Gisèle's unique dream is to leave the place and to be able to live in a country of black people.

But violence also permeates the intimate sphere of the house. Gisèle Pineau's father exerted a strict military discipline and abuse while imposing the law of silence.

> "(…)Mon père était très très sévère, et puis on revenait, on le connaissait à peine. On le connaissait pour sa violence. Et les filles de ma famille, nous avec ma sœur ainée, on le connaissait pour euh…par ses attitudes qu'il avait qui n'étaient pas les attitudes d'un père. C'est à dire qu'avec ma sœur ainée, nous avons eu droit à des attouchements. Oui je suis obligée de le dire pour bien expliquer aussi. Et donc pourquoi j'écris Elise, pourquoi j'écris. Je suis une petite fille, je suis sommée de survivre, de trouver moyen de survivre à la violence extérieure, parce que c'est le racisme. (…) Aujourd'hui, enfin maintenant, je dis voilà, mais j'ai sauvé ma peau, parce qu'à l'intérieur c'était dangereux, violent, il y avait des coups aussi, des coups de ceinture. Je voyais ça, mon frère qui ramenait 0 de conduite, bon il était battu avec un ceinturon. C'était très violent. (…) On parle pas dans ma famille, on ne dit pas les choses. Ma mère qui ne nous protégeait pas. Elle était là. Mais elle-même elle était, alors je n'ai pas fait de psychanalyse mais peut être mes livres m'ont permis de me …Mais c'était une violence aussi de sentir qu'on est en danger. La mère elle est là, elle lit des romans d'amour, c'est ça aussi. Moi j'écris des livres, j'écris des livres mais c'est une vie comme ça un peu sur le fil."
>
> "(…)My father was especially severe, and when he'd come back, we barely knew him. We knew him through his violence. And girls in my family, me and my older sister, we knew him through, well… his behavior that he exhibited which is not that of a father's. I mean, me and my sister, we were molested. Yes, I have to say it to explain it well. To explain, also, why I write, Élise, why I write. I am a little girl, and I am forced to survive, to find a way to survive

[27] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.

> to the external violence—because it's racism. (…) I saved my own skin because, inside, it was dangerous, violent." There were whippings too—whippings with a belt. I would witness it: my brother coming back home with a bad grade for misbehaving, well, he was beaten with a belt. It was very violent. (…) We don't speak in my family, we don't say anything. My mother did not protect us. She was there, but she herself was, well… I did not study psychoanalysis but perhaps my books have allowed me to… It was also a violence to feel that we were in a situation of danger. The mother is here, she reads romance novels—this is also how it is. Me, I write books—I write books but it's a life, you know, on the edge."[28]

Intellectual formation in between French and Creole culture

Through her family and their embrace of the French legitimate culture, Gisèle Pineau acquired the love for reading and writing. Her father's investment in French classical literature from the 17th to late 19th century and encyclopedias, attesting of his intellectual interests and endorsement of the French literature, facilitated Gisèle's interest and acquisition of a literary culture. Indeed, among her brothers and sisters, she is the one who will take advantage of the personal family library and discover authors who will later make a strong impression for her own writing work, especially Emile Zola among the classical French authors.

> "Mon père, mon père ce héros, il voulait que ses enfants soient instruits. Il achetait des encyclopédies. Il achetait des auteurs français classiques. Tout était là. J'avais des murs d'encyclopédies.
> ***D'accord, donc quand vous êtes enfant.***
> Enfant, il y a les livres à la maison. Et moi je me passionne.
> ***Les livres de littérature classique***
> Il y avait tout, il y avait Zola, le théâtre il y avait Corneille. Balzac, il y avait vraiment waow, toute la poésie. Et il y avait les encyclopédies. J'aimais avoir le poids de ces livres, très très lourd sur les genoux comme ça. Et apprendre, un, deux mots nouveaux chaque jour, feuilleter les pages, j'aime ça. J'en ai acheté, j'ai des encyclopédies, parce que c'est une partie de mon enfance aussi qui est pleine de lumière, parce qu'il y avait cette ouverture sur la culture, des histoires sur la mythologie. Tout était là.

> "My father, this hero, he wanted his kids to be educated. He would buy encyclopedias. He would buy French classics. Everything was right there. I would have walls covered in encyclopedias.
> ***I see, so when you were a child?***
> Yes, as a child, there were books in the house. And I fell in love.

[28] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.

> ***You fell in love with classics of literature.***
> There was everything: Zola; theatre like Corneille; Balzac. There truly was, I mean, everything in poetry. There were encyclopedias. I enjoyed feeling the weight of these books—very, very heavy, like this, on my knees. And to learn one or two words each day, to turn the pages. I like this. I bought some—I mean I have encyclopedias here, because they are a part of my childhood that is, also, full of light since it was this window into culture, into histories and mythologies. Everything was there."[29]

In spite of the violence of racism, Gisèle Pineau did not alienate herself from school; neither did she reject the legitimate cultural values that the institution purports. She continued to work hard in the discipline which she excelled: French composition. French classes and essay writing give her the opportunity to gain credit and be valued in the classroom, to distinguish herself, to be treated as equal to her school mates. Like Maryse Condé or Simone Schwarz-Bart, the belief and faith in the school institution, as a legitimate place of learning and training remained strong up to the university level. At the age of 18, Pineau came back to Paris to study literature at the University of Paris X- Nanterre, with the intention of becoming a teacher, a professional position that she thought would facilitate her career as a writer. When she had to take mandatory classes of Latin and old Greek, she distanced herself from the academic institution. She continued to read and write on her own and then became a psychiatric nurse in 1979. She saw this profession as providing a secure income while allowing her to pursue her writing. This career also gave her an access and connection to the social reality, a living source of inspiration for her novels that was essential to her writing activity.

[29] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.

If Pineau's father and school provided the material context and impetus to discover "highbrow" French literature, women in her family also played a major influence on her reading and writing practices. Through her mother, Pineau developed the love for reading (her focus was mainly on romance novels, what can be characterized as a stereotypically feminine literature). Her grandmother, Man Ya, was brought along with a family after a military vacation in Guadeloupe, in 1961, to take her away from the domestic violence of her husband. Illiterate in the French language, deprived of her garden and herbal remedies, Man Ya became homesick, "a depression" that no modern medicine could not cure. According to Gisèle, she was the silent centerpiece, who played a crucial role for her growing up in the hostile environment of the Parisian suburbs and the violence in the family. She brought with her the history of her people and slavery, a history perceived as shame and humiliation that was not talked about; the Creole language, which was debased and not spoken, especially in France where assimilation was the objective; the love affection, solace, and faith that one day Gisèle would return to the "promised land", her "non-native" Guadeloupe; stories of fears and magic from her country that enchant young children; and the disruptive chaos and force of contestation challenging indirectly the military order Pineau father's attempted to impose. Through her grandmother, Pineau is exposed to Caribbean culture, the oral traditions and so learns the art of storytelling, of drawing from the endless potentialities of the imagination, of describing a world where the realities of the human condition can be also challenged by mystery and magic.

> "Elle était complètement illettrée, elle travaillait dans les champs de canne. Mais ça ne veut rien dire, parce que c'était elle la grande dame en fin de compte. C'était elle **LA** grande dame,

qui a pu nous transmettre le pays avec une histoire. Parce que ce que ma mère était incapable de faire…je sais pas si vous connaissez cette anecdote. Un jour à la télévision française, pendant ces années 60, je vois un documentaire sur l'esclavage. Et je vois une colonie de noirs, enchainés, nus avec des chaines... Et je dis à ma mère, maman mais qu'est-ce que c'est ? Et je vois que ce sont des gens qui me ressemblent. Il y a si peu de noirs qui passent déjà à la télévision. Là quand je vois des noirs, je les vois enchainés, nus. Ma mère me dit non c'est rien, c'est le passé. Et ma grand-mère Julia qui me dit en créole, et bien c'est ça, nous aussi on vient de là, de l'Afrique. C'est ce que sa grand-mère lui avait raconté, elle me le restitue. Elle me dit qu'on était esclave, que nos ancêtres ont traversé par les bateaux.

Oui oui, elle vous explique.

Elle explique ça. Et donc, elle qui me donne le pays, l'histoire du pays. Elle qui me donne la langue, la langue parce que ma mère ne parle qu'en français à ses enfants. Mais c'était de l'ignorance de la part de…c'était parce que c'était comme ça. Beaucoup de migrants, quand ils arrivent dans le pays d'accueil, et bien ils veulent donner le meilleur à leurs enfants. Donc ils bannissent leur langue, surtout si ils considèrent que leur langue est un patois ; encore quand c'est une langue prestigieuse, mais là un patois, c'est la langue des vieux nègres. C'est ça la langue créole à l'époque, la langue des habitations. C'est ce qu'on dit.

Oui il y a une représentation très négative

Très négative des gens qui ne savent pas parler le français.

Non-instruit

Voilà, illettrés, des couillons. Et donc ils veulent que leurs enfants parlent le français. Mais ma grand-mère, elle était un élément comme dans un jeu d'échec, c'était une pièce maitresse. Une pièce maitresse, qui était là, qui disait rien. Mais elle était là pour mettre le désordre dans cette organisation avec mon père. Mon père voulait que tout soit organisé. Mais pendant ce temps-là, elle nous transmettait les choses, la langue créole, l'amour qu'on a reçu, l'amour qu'on a reçu, le sentiment d'être aimé, d'être aimé. C'est ma grand-mère, c'est ma grand-mère. Je raconte dans *L'Exil selon Julia*, quand elle nous réveillait la nuit, elle nous réveillait la nuit quand on avait été privé de dessert pour nous donner une pomme. (…) Nos parents nous ont privé de dessert mais elle attend qu'ils soient couchés : « ti moun, ti moun, … ? ti pomme France » ça c'est de la tendresse, de l'amour et ça on le sent. On le sent, vraiment, vraiment, vraiment. C'est merveilleux d'avoir eu ça, moi je lui suis vraiment reconnaissante.

Et les histoires qu'elle vous racontait vous vous rappelez ?

Ah oui ohlala, mais les diablesses, les soucougnans, c'est elle qui nous raconte tout ça, dans son lit, dans son odeur. Et puis les prières aussi, le sentiment d'appartenance aussi. Mais tu as un pays. Quand je lui disais, mais on me traite de …elle disait mais tu vas retourner. La confiance, la confiance de savoir, tu vas retourner un jour. C'est pour ça que j'aime bien dire que c'est grâce à elle qu'il y a eu Mai 68, que la France a pété de partout. Parce que la grand-mère qui veut que ses petits-enfants la rejoignent et voilà (rire). Bien sûr c'est une boutade."

"She was completely illiterate; she would work in cane fields. But it doesn't mean anything because, in the end, she was ***THE*** great lady. The great lady who was able to transmit the land with a story. Because what my mother was incapable of doing… I don't know if you are familiar with this anecdote. One day, on French television, during the sixties, I am watching this documentary on slavery. And I see a colony of Black people, chained up, naked with shackles on them… And I say to my mother: "Mom, what is this?" What I see are people who look like me. There were already so few Black people on television that, when I see Black people, I see them in shackles, naked. My mother says that, no, it's nothing, that it's in the past. And my grandmother Julia says in Creole: "Well, there it is, we too come from there, from Africa." What her grandmother had told her, she passes it on to me. She tells me that we were slaves, that our ancestors crossed with the boats.

Yes, yes, she explains everything to you.

She explains everything. And so, it is her who gives me the land, the story of my country. It is her who gives me the language, the language because my mother only speaks in French to her children. But it was ignorance that… It was just what it was. A lot of migrants, when they arrive at their destination, well, they want to give what is best to their kids. So, they banish

their language, especially if they consider that their language is a pidgin. Things could be different with a prestigious language, but a pidgin like this one, it's the language of old negroes. This is what Creole language was at the time, the language of plantations. It's what we say.

Yes, there is a very negative representation of it.

A very negative one of people who do not know how to speak French.

Non-educated.

Exactly, illiterate, moronic people. And so, they want their kids to speak French. But my grandmother, she was like a special pawn in a game of chess, a choice piece. A choice piece who was there, who did not say anything. She was there to bring disorder into my father's organization. My father wanted everything to be organized. Meanwhile, however, she would transmit things to us, the Creole language, the love we received, the feeling of being loved, of being loved. All this is my grandmother, my grandmother. I write, in *Exile: According to Julia*, how she would come wake us up at night, that she would wake us to give us an apple when we had been deprived of dessert. (…) Our parents deprived us of dessert and she would wait until they were asleep: "ti moun, ti moun,…? Ti pomme France." This is loving kindness, it's love, and you can feel it. You can really, really, *really* feel it. It's wonderful to have had this, and I am very grateful for it.

What about the stories she would tell, do you remember them?

Oh, my goodness, yes, but she tells us about she-devils, about soucougnans—she tells us about all of this in her bed, with her smell. But also prayers, with a feeling of belonging, too. "But you have a country." When I told her that I was insulted… she would tell me: "But, you will come back." The faith, the faith to know that, one day, you will come back. That's why I like to say that it is thanks to her that May 68 happened, that France exploded everywhere. Because of my grandmother who wants her grandkids to come join her [*laughs*]. It's a joke, of course."[30]

Gisèle Pineau's grandmother is the one who questions the myth of France as a universal and superior culture. This helped Gisèle Pineau deconstruct the prejudiced colonial mindset, and learn how to love the beauty of Caribbean nature, the art of gardening and Creole cooking.

"Mais moi j'étais plein de préjugés de cette vieille femme négresse de Guadeloupe, puisqu'elle ne sait pas lire. J'ai l'impression que je la domine aussi, que je suis plus intelligente que j'ai un pouvoir, le pouvoir de lui dire mais c'est facile. Quand je lui apprends à écrire son prénom, ce pouvoir-là. Donc ma grand-mère m'a appris l'humilité. (…) Mais moi, à 14 ans, je me suis retrouvée dans cette nature guadeloupéenne comme une illettrée, comme l'illétrée que ma grand-mère avait été quand elle était face aux lettres. Moi face à la nature guadeloupéenne, j'étais une illettrée. Je ne sais pas ce que c'est que cet arbre-là. Je ne connais pas les arbres, et donc

Oui vous aviez grandi en ville

Mais j'ai grandi, il y avait des pelouses, des pelouses interdites, on a pas le droit de marcher. Des arbres qui ne portent pas de fruit. Et c'est ma grand-mère Julia, Man Ya qui m'apprend, m'apprend, sans prétention, sans me narguer, sans ironie ; qui m'apprend à reconnaître, à préparer le cacao, puisqu'elle vendait des bâtons de cacao. Elle avait un jardin extraordinaire. (…) Et le cacao, le café, comment le faire griller, comment féconder la vanille, cueillir les prunes citère, monter dans les arbres. Elle avait une rivière qui coulait derrière sa maison. Elle m'a donné un cours accéléré pour reprendre ma place dans le pays, me positionner ; et puis la langue créole, manger créole. "

[30] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.

> "I, too, was full of prejudice about this old negro woman from Guadeloupe, since she did not know how to read. I have the feeling that I dominate her, that I am smarter, that I have power—the power to tell her: "But, look, it's easy." So, my grandmother taught me humility. (…) when I was 14, I found myself in this Guadeloupean wilderness, it was as if I were illiterate, as illiterate as my grandmother was when she faced letters. Me, in front of this Guadeloupean wilderness, I was illiterate. I don't know what this tree might be. I don't know trees, so…
> ***Yes, since you grew up in a city.***
> But [where] I grew up, there were lawns, forbidden lawns on which you could not walk. Trees that did not bear fruits. And it is my grandmother Julia, Man Ya, who teaches me, who teaches me, without pretension, without taunt, without irony—she teaches me to recognize, to prepare cocoa, because she used to sell cocoa sticks. She had an extraordinary garden. (…) And cocoa, coffee: how to grill it, how to pollinize vanilla, how to pick June plums, how to climb trees. She had a river that would flow behind her house. She gave me immersive lessons to find my place again in the country, to position myself; and also the Creole language, how to eat Creole food."[31]

In 1968, Pineau returned to Martinique and then Guadeloupe. She had dreamed of returning for years. But once her family finally resettled in Martinique and then Guadeloupe, the living experience brought its own challenges. The multiple and complex layers of exile that her family history entailed made Pineau an outsider everywhere. Nevertheless, in Martinique, she did not have to face the stigma of her skin color. She was ready to accept her differences and to work to be accepted in a new society where she had to learn the language and the social codes. In the end, she grew from the experience coming to the realization that "you are always the other of someone, you always have to live with your difference, and you always have to live with your own solitude."

> "Quand j'arrive, parmi les miens soi-disant, j'arrive parmi les noirs, et bien je suis encore différente. Mais c'est ça le jeu en fait. Parce que c'est un truc qui n'a pas de fin, parce que finalement tu es toujours l'étranger de quelqu'un, tu es toujours dans ta différence et dans ta solitude. Donc je me retrouve la négresse qui se prend pour une blanche, je me retrouve Bounti, je me retrouve négropolitaine. Je me retrouve pour qui tu te prends, tu te prends pour une blanche, parce que je roule les r quand je parle le français, parce que je ne comprends pas tout ce qui se dit en créole. Mais cette fois ci, j'accepte ; j'accepte cela parce que je me dis voilà, je dois mériter. Mais c'est tout un cheminement mental. Parce que là, d'accord j'étais pas chez moi en France. Je vais dans un pays de noirs, de mes parents, mes grands-parents. Et bien il faut que je m'adapte, il faut que je me fasse accepter. C'est pas évident de se faire accepter. Parce qu'en même temps, on ne peut pas acheter l'amitié des gens, parce qu'ils vont sentir que vous essayez de leur faire plaisir. Il faut rester quand même à sa place, mais c'est très difficile, on est un peu en train de jongler. Où tu étais ? Ah bon tu roules les R. Et puis on est pris entre l'envie d'aller vers ce que l'on connaît, d'aller vers les enfants blancs de l'école.

[31] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.

Elise, est-ce que vous comprenez ce que je veux dire ? Peut-être que cela était mes bourreaux ailleurs en France
Vous aviez finalement peut-être plus de points communs ?
Exactement Elise. Mais je me reconnais, dans les manières, dans les jeux et en même temps…c'était un brassage. Mais c'est ce qui est passionnant, parce que c'est la vie aussi tout ça, parce que tout le temps on doit relever des défis en permanence. Et voilà comment je grandis."

"When I arrive, amongst my supposed kin, I arrive amongst Black people, well, once again I'm different. But it's the game, you know. Because it really is an endless thing, since, in the end, you will always be someone else's other, you always have to live with your own difference and solitude. So, I end up as the negro woman who thinks she is white, I am called a Coconut, I am called "negropolitan." I am called: "Who do you think you are? You think you are a white woman?" Because I roll my R's when I speak French, because I do not understand everything that is being said in Creole. But, this time, I accept it: I accept it because I think to myself "Right, you need to earn it." But it's a long mental evolution. Because, okay, France was not my home. I go to the Black people's land, the land of my grandparents, of my parents. And, well, I need to adapt, I need to be accepted by others. Because, at the same time, you cannot buy people's friendship since they will sense that you are trying to please them. You have to learn your place, even though it's very difficult, and you have to juggle a bit. "Where are you from? Oh, I see, you roll your R's." And suddenly you want to walk toward what you know, toward white kids in school. Do you understand what I mean, Élise? Maybe they were my bullies away from France.
Maybe you had, in the end, more things in common?
Exactly, Élise. But I know myself, my manners, the games I play, and at the same time… It was a mix. But it's also what is fascinating, because it's life, you know? Because you need to always challenge yourself. This is how I grew up."[32]

II. Becoming a writer in the margins of la Créolité

1. Writing as a vocation

From the Latin "vocatio"/ "vocationis", the word "vocation" is rooted in early Christian theology. A synonym of "election", the term designates an internal movement, a personal inclination through which one feels compelled to respond to a divine call and lead a religious life. The term progressively extended to include any

[32] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.

natural inclination to undertake a particular activity, a profession, a mode of being or way of life. With the development of a market of symbolic goods (cultural products) in France and more broadly in the Western world, an individualist and subjective conception of art and artistic creation emerged.[33] The vocational model became a privileged mode of practice for artistic endeavor- as those activities aim at the production of an original and unpredictable final product distinguishing itself from amateurism for its professional intent and also from commercial and artisanal work with its repetitive and predictable tasks. To become a writer usually goes along with narrating a vocation, a destiny insisting on the singular identity of the writer and establishing a quasi-mystic relation to literary creation.[34] One lives the experience in an intimate and personal way. To respond to the "call" implies dedication, gift of time, energy, acceptance of the constraints, effort and even sacrifice and suffering (at the physical and moral level) but would be later rewarded.[35] Indeed, as noted by Bernard Lahire, to live an experience under the sign of vocation requires that the activity is symbolically and socially valued.[36]

In her description about becoming a writer, Pineau insists on the idea of vocation. The vocation or call to writing starts at an early age, with the production and artisanal publications of 10 copies of her short novel illustrated by her brother.[37]

---

[33] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods" in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essay on Art and Literature* trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Gisèle Sapiro, "Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire" Les Conditions de formation de la vocation d'écrivain", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 3, no.168 (2007): 15-17.
[34] Nathalie Heinich, *Etre écrivain. Création et identitée* (Paris: La découverte, 2000).
[35] Gisèle Sapiro, "La vocation artistique, entre don et don de soi," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 3, no.168 (2007): 9.
[36] Bernard Lahire, "Avoir la vocation," *Sciences sociales et Sport* 2, no.12 (2018): 148.
[37] Interview with Gisèle Pineau by Elise Finielz

Aware of the potential value of her creative work and the importance of monetary compensation, as a material proof of symbolic recognition from her peers, she priced the book at 20 cents and sold 3 of them. A narrative of destiny or a supposed "pre-destination" always acknowledges what occurred after the fact. It creates a myth around the public image of the author, a retrospective reconstruction of a founding moment in the trajectory, while contributing to the illusion of a natural disposition for writing, hence minimizing the actual work it involves and the social dispositions that came to support an individual. It is nevertheless important to understand the meaning attached to this first writing and publishing experience which contains all the elements of her relationship with writing. Being a writer is envisioned not just as a career or to glorify and idealize her own individual talent, but rather is a relational experience.

In the highly unhospitable environment of Paris, writing appears as a refuge; the blank pages serve as a host for all the words Gisèle possesses in her imagination, without boundaries. It speaks to the therapeutic value of expressing emotions that can be paralyzing ("consoling words"). By articulating her own point of view, a situation that could have left her voiceless and could appear meaningless (the unspeakably of a shocking situation), the author takes her distance and examines traumatic experiences. Through words, she finds the restorative and comforting values of telling her story, or at least the possibility to ask questions regarding a situation that, at such a young age and with the scant historical information she had, could have been puzzling. With writing comes a sense of empowerment: the ability to make sense, to use words for a new positive meaning, and to initiate a dialogue when one is seen as an outcast, excluded from any possible communication with the main group. By deciding to

produce a few copies of the book and to sell them, she tries to reach an audience, to create a bridge between herself and the other children who live in the same neighborhood. By telling her story, she educates her classmates and restores her place as a human being, a story that counteracts racism and the negative representations associated with her skin color. Dialogue and reconciliation are the objectives of her writing approach. Ultimately, Pineau is able to see the positive side of her traumatic experience. She found in herself the resources or the secret forces to overcome the situation. However, if the natural drive to write meets with the necessity to save one's own body and self, in the case of Pineau, it is important to place her discourse of vocation within the larger historical and social context of the literary field. The vocation rhetoric is also the result of the convergence of an individual and existential disposition with the objective structures of the social space.[38]

Contrary to Simone Schwarz-Bart or Maryse Condé from the previous generation, Gisèle Pineau can envision herself as a writer and pursue this dream as she has more models of not only White French Literature but also Black and female authors, whether African American or from the Caribbean that she can relate to. If, growing up in Paris, Emile Zola will be the author who made the strongest impression on her, she also read Richard Wright's novels and could identify with the Black characters and their experience. As a teenager, she will discover Caribbean literature with two major novels: *Gouverneurs de la rosée* by Jacques Roumain and *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle* by Simone Schwarz-Bart. "Pour une petite fille comme moi qui ai grandi en Europe, c'est réellement un monde qui s'ouvrait à moi avec ces

[38] Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons Pratiques: Sur la Théorie de l'action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 151.

auteurs." ["For a little girl like me who grew up in Europe, it is a world (the Creole world) that opened to me."][39]

Writing does not require any professional training, and no formal condition (such as a diploma) prohibits the access to the literary field. Apart from certified professional competencies or official educational titles, it is nevertheless important to identify the objective and material conditions that allowed Gisèle Pineau to become a writer and be recognized as such. The preceding generation of writers will help her not only establish symbolic models for writing from which she can develop her own identity as a writer but are also the ones who helped her access the symbolic recognition of her individual talent in the Parisian literary field. The feeling of election (an intuitive idea of predestination) can only come to realization with positive signs of recognition at different stages, confirming the gifted writing abilities and giving access to publication and consecration.

2. Entering the literary field, on the edge of the movement of "la Créolité"

Initially, Gisèle Pineau's lack of contact and connection within the literary field placed her in a disadvantaged position. But her determination to become a writer, her natural inclination, perseverance, and belief in her vocation, encouraged her to continue writing. She continued sending manuscripts to publishers which were promptly rejected. Her goal was not just to write but also to be recognized as "a writer" by the official institutions. For her, that is the Parisian literary field and to play

[39] Interview by Thomas Spears, Cinq questions pour île-en-île, "Mes influences", 0:00'-5:48', https://ile-en-ile.org/gisele-pineau-5-questions-pour-ile-en-ile/

by "the rules of the games" (Bourdieu). Her choice of publishing companies of very high repute and general broad focus revealed her high expectations. She has always refused to self-publish. The publishing companies are, for her, the gatekeepers of the quality of her work and guarantee of a successful entrance among notable authors. In spite of her hard work and persistence, this strategy failed in the first place for lack of a network. A study shows that one manuscript out of 1,500 are accepted to be read in a committee by publisher's Readers (Comité de lecture)[40] leaving only a very slight chance for those who do not possess any connections in the field.

Winning the first prize, however, for a short story contest organized in 1987 under the patronage of Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé, whose renown was already well established at a national and international level, opened the door to the recognition of her work in the literary circle of the French Caribbean and France. It is important to note that it was at a particular moment of effervescence in the nascent Caribbean literature, with the emergence of a new generation of authors and the movement of "la Créolité", led by the Martinican writers Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé and Raphael Confiant. The three *creolistes* asserted their presence in the Parisian literary field in 1989 with a manifesto, *Eloge de la Créolité/ In Praise of Creoleness*,[41] highlighting the plural cultural diversity of the French Caribbean identity (with the famous introductory line: "neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles"). This movement developed in close proximity with the poetic and philosophical position of Edouard Glissant, acclaimed at

[40] Delphine Naudier, "Sociologie d'un miracle editorial dans un contexte féministe,"*Genèses* 64 (2006): 72.
[41] Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau & Raphaël Confiant. *Éloge de la créolité*, Paris: Gallimard, 1989.

the national and international level and who published in 1990 *Poetics of relations*. In 1992, Patrick Chamoiseau earned the highest literary honor (the Goncourt Prize) with his novel *Texaco.*

Gisèle Pineau, from her first prize won in Guadeloupe (and the only edition of this competition) made her way to the Parisian publishing companies at the same moment. The award-winning short story "Paroles de terre en larmes" was published by Hatier in 1988.[42] Then she had then a short story included in a collection edited by Ralph Ludwig in the prestigious publishing house Gallimard.[43] The inclusion of her short story among the works of the most acclaimed authors of the moment, such as Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, gave her access to consecration in the Parisian literary field. This presented a convergence of her personal style at that time, the favorable editorial context and a positive reception in the Caribbean and in France. *Le Serpent à plumes,* a new publishing company which started in 1988 with a literary journal of the same name, propelled her career as a novelist. Created by a group of friends, all outsiders from the world of publishing companies but who shared a passion for literature (the director Pierre Astier was an art critic), *Le Serpent à plumes* offered a journal for avant-garde literature and innovation. The idea was to revive underappreciated genres of the short story and the novel. The aim was not only to honor the literary talents of authors from all over the world, and to assert the vital role of literature in the present-day issues. *Le Serpent à Plumes* demonstrated their belief

[42] Gisèle Pineau, "Paroles de Terre en Larmes", in *Paroles de Terre en Larmes: Nouvelles* (Paris: Hatier, 1988), 5-20.
[43] Gisèle Pineau, "Tourments d'amour" in *Ecrire la parole de la nuit; La nouvelle littéraire antillaise,* ed. Ralph Ludwig (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 79-87.

that it was the responsibility of publishing companies to promote authors who were under-recognized in France.[44] Against a racialized marketing of literary products, the journal and then the publishing company sought to be an original, high-quality and design publication.[45] It played a major role in publishing and introducing major authors from Africa and the Caribbean (such as Chinua Achebe, Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Emmanuel Dongala, Waberi, Nuruddin Farah, Aminata Sow Fall, Dany Laférière, Yanick Lahens, to only name a few). Pineau was one of them and received two prizes for the first novel *La Grande drive des Esprits,* which she published with *Le Serpent à Plumes* (prix des lectrices de Elle in France and prix Carbet de la Caraïbe in 1994). The recognition and national prizes allowed her to move to major Parisian publishing companies ("Stock" and later "Le mercure de France" and "Philippe Rey.")

Gisèle Pineau's initial stylistic choice, using creole expressions and the oral storytelling tradition, was a personal choice proving her connection to a native land she was deprived of when growing up, to show "her love for Guadeloupe". It coincided with the editorial success of the movement "La créolité", from which she benefitted. However, she did not associate herself with the movement and moved away from its aesthetic direction. Once she had accessed the prestigious and generalist French publishing houses, she pursued her own poetic voice, thereby claiming her independence, locating her outside the parameters of a literary, feminist, or political affiliation.

---

[44] Konaré, Kadiatou and Pierre Astier, "Entretien avec Pierre Astier, directeur du Serpent à Plumes. Propos recueillis par Kadiatou Konaré," *Notre Librairie* 9 (1998): 30-34.
[45] Interview with Pierre Bisiou, one of the founding members of *Le Serpent à Plumes* by Elise Finielz in Paris, July 2017.

“Il y a une posture de l’écrivain antillais, j’ai remarqué ça qui réfléchit sur son œuvre plus comme un essayiste, qui va lancer des théories et qui va parler au nom du peuple. Bon moi peut être que je parle plus facilement de moi, parce que c’est ce que je connais, je peux pas parler au nom des gens. Je dis ce que j’observe, je dis ce qui me contrarie, ce qui m’interpelle, ce qui me fait mal, mais je ne me pose pas en parlant au nom de toute une population, voilà. Je ne suis pas un porte-parole, ni un porte-drapeau, et je revendique cette liberté d’être moi avec mon histoire.

Vous dîtes dans une interview en 2012 : « Ils ont essayé de m’enrôler, mais que vous préférez rester en dehors indépendante…» c’était plutôt les écrivains de la créolité ?
Mais bien sûr, mais en fait quand j’ai écrit la Grande drive, là c’est un livre que j’ai écrit pour dire mon appartenance à un pays, à la Guadeloupe. Quand j’ai écrit la Grande drive, on était au plein cœur du mouvement de la créolité, ce mouvement avait le vent en poupe. Et moi j’ai dit, mais moi aussi je peux écrire. Et c’est mon roman le plus créole, très créolisé. Et après je prends de la distance avec cette écriture. Mais c’était une facilité pour moi d’écrire comme ça, et en même temps, c’était pour dire tout mon amour pour la Guadeloupe, pour le pays. Pour dire que même si je suis née à Paris, je suis un enfant du pays, de la campagne, je connais. Et voilà c’était mon gros challenge. C’était ma manière à moi d’être dans cette créolité-là, d’être dans le fin fond des campagnes de Guadeloupe. J’ai adoré, j’ai adoré écrire.

Et après, pourquoi vous vous en êtes plutôt éloignée ?
Parce que c’était pas ma vrai voix, V O I X. C’était pas ma voix naturelle. Je veux écrire avec tout ce que je suis, dans une totale liberté, je veux pas m’imposer de créoliser chaque phrase, chaque mot, de mettre une sauce pimentée (rire) pour dire que c’est l’authenticité. C’était valable dans les années 90 mais bon là je ne me sens pas d’écrire comme ça , même si j’aime beaucoup toutes les images, mais je les pratique avec modération, une certaine modération. Bon on sent qu’on est dans le pays, la Caraïbe, dans un milieu créolophone, mais je n’appuie pas trop.

Oui mais est-ce que vous avez eu des liens avec des mouvements féministes ou pas du tout… ?
Pas vraiment… non. Mais parce qu’il y a des causes à défendre ; parce que voilà il faut regarder autour de soi. Tout le monde sait qu’il y a des enfants qui sont prostitués dans leur famille sur plusieurs continents. Féministes ? non je veux tout d’abord regarder toute la misère, toute la misère des migrants avant de brandir le drapeau des féministes. Il y a des êtres humains. J’ai vu qu’il y a des femmes qui portent des bébés. I l faut défendre toutes les causes. Je n’en mets pas vraiment une en avant. Bon je remercie celles qui se sont battus pour la liberté et tous les êtres humains qui se sont battus pour les libertés, pour plus de respect des uns des autres. Mais je veux pas m’enfermer en fait. Je ne veux pas…je veux pas avoir une autre étiquette. Et puis c’est pour moi une forme d’honnêteté, c’est une forme d’honnêteté parce que c’est une manière de me protéger, voilà regardez, féministe. (…)

Et vous n’avez pas d’affiliation politique particulière non plus…ou de lien avec la politique ?
Pas du tout. Non parce qu’à partir du moment où on a une certaine notoriété, on est vite brandi comme une marionnette. On est utilisé. Son nom… dis quelque chose…Et puis je préfère rester ici à Marie-Galante, pas trop me montrer, être dans ma création, dans la joie, dans la joie de ma création, dans mon bonheur de création et puis voilà. Et choisir, choisir. Ne pas m’imposer des obligations d’aller…ah c’est tel politique qui fait ça, peut-être on me donnera un truc en contrepartie. Je veux pas me compromettre. ”

“There is a type of position adopted by French Caribbean writers, I noticed, which consists in behaving more like an essayist: to theorize and to speak “in the name of people.” I can surely and more easily speak about myself because it’s what or who I know best, but I cannot speak for other people. I talk about what I observe, I talk about what upsets me, what makes me

think, what hurts me—but I do not position myself as someone who can speak in the name of an entire population, that's all. I'm not a spokesperson, nor a standard-bearer, and I claim this freedom to be myself with my own history. One day, this Antillean author told me that he would never include snow in his novels. I told him: "I'm sorry but there was snow in my childhood."

Yes, yes! And, on that note, I have another question about your relationship with other writers from the Caribbean. I read in one of your interviews that you are rather independent…
Yes, I sort of keep it to myself. (…) But, you know, when I wrote *Drifting of Spirits*, it's a book I wrote to tell my connection to a country, to Guadeloupe. When I wrote *Drifting of Spirits*, it was in the middle of the "créolité" movement, it was a very popular movement. So, I thought that I, too, could write. It was my most Creole part, very Creolist. But after all this, I took some distance with this type of writing. It was particularly easy for me to write this way, and at the same time, it was a way for me to express my own love for Guadeloupe, for the country. To say that, even though I was born in Paris, I am a child of the country, of the countryside, that I know it. And this, really, was my biggest challenge. It was my own way of being in this kind of créolité, to be in the innermost part of Guadeloupean countryside. I love it, I loved writing.

And afterwards, why did you move away from it?
Because it wasn't my real voice, V.O.I.C.E.[46] It was not my natural voice. I want to write with every bit of myself, in total freedom—I don't want to force myself to Creolize every sentence, every word, to add hot sauce [*laughs*] in order to call it authentic. This was perhaps worth it in the nineties but, you know, at this point, I did not feel like writing this way, even though I really like all the images it comes with. But I practice them in moderation, moderately. So, you know, you can tell that you are in the country, in the Caribbean, in a Creole-speaking milieu, but I don't insist on it too much.

(…)

I also read that you do not define yourself as a feminist…
No, it says a lot… And, you know, it's easy to say "yes." I mean, I am a woman, I am a woman. I am a human on this earth. Because, if I define myself as a feminist, I'm afraid of excluding others, like children.

Yes, but did you have connections with feminist movements? Or not at all?
Not really, no… But, I mean, there are causes to defend. Because, you know, you have to look around you. Everybody knows that there are children who are sold into prostitution by their family around the world. Feminist? No, what I look at, first and foremost, is misery—the misery of migrants—before waving any feminist flag. There are human beings. I saw that some women carry babies… You have to defend every cause and I don't make any one more important than another. I mean, I thank those who fought for freedom and every human being who fought for liberties, for more respect toward others. But, in the end, I don't want to lock myself in place. I don't want to… I don't want to have another label. And, for me, it's a form of honesty—a form of honesty because it's a way to protect myself. "Look at her, she's a feminist." I mean, yes, someone always tells me when I do literary events: someone tells me "Ah, Gisèle Pineau, you write about women, women's struggle…" So, women who have been beaten and raped—yes, I talk about that. Yes, I talk about women: I talk about human beings who have been abused, human beings who have been oppressed. This interests me because it's

[46] In French, Pineau uses the word "voix" (voice) which is a homonym of "voie" (path) so she spells the word out in order to elucidate the meaning. This cannot be translated adequately in English.

> a real topic. And if my quill can help in any way, I would rather dip it in this type of ink. But, it's not an insult. I… Yeah.
>
> ***And you also do not support any particular political movement… Nor do you have any relationship with politics?***
> Not at all. No, because when you start growing in renown, people will very quickly use you as a puppet. You become used. "Her name… Say something…" And I would rather stay here in Marie-Galante, to not show myself—to remain in a space of creation, joy, the joy of my own creation, in the bliss of creating something, that's it. And to choose, to choose. To not force myself to go… "Ah, yes, this political person does this, perhaps I can gain something from it." I don't want to compromise myself."[47]

Here Pineau insists on her singular voice and poetic independence. Her editorial experience in the wave of the movement "la Créolité" nuanced the monolithic and masculinist view of its gendered identity. [48] It is true that the movement itself gathered only men. But the research on Pineau's trajectory proves that it also helped promoting women writers. However, more than a masculinist gesture of exclusion or marginalization from male authors, women writers from the French Caribbean did not let themselves be coopted by the movement. Suzanne Dracius, a female poet and novelist from Martinique, published a first novel *L'autre qui danse*[49] in Paris at the same time period. Although she was personally close to the authors, she refused to join the movement and to be "la femme de service" ("the woman at their service").[50]

Gisèle Pineau's position vis à vis the movement goes along with Maryse Condé who organized a conference and published with Madeleine Cottenet-Hage a collection of essays in 1995, entitled *Penser la Créolité*,[51] as a response to *In Praise of*

[47] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.
[48] A. James Arnold, "The Erotics of Colonialism in Contemporary French West Indian Literary Culture," *New West Indian Guide* 68, no. 1&2 (1994): 5.
[49] Suzanne Dracius, *L'autre qui danse* (Paris: Seghers, 1989).
[50] Suzanne Dracius, Interview by Elise Finielz, Fort-de-France Martinique, May 2017.
[51] Maryse Condé, Madelein Cottenet-Hage, ed. *Penser la créolité* (Paris: Khartala, 1995).

Creolness. Gisèle Pineau is one of the contributors with an essay on her own experience as a black woman who writes in the presence of her people, in particular women.[52] She emphasizes the centrality of her grandmother as a source of inspiration, questioning and thinking. Condé or Pineau's stance is to resist a monolithic vision of a Creole identity.[53] They refuse its isolation within one single definition, its fetishization and the prescriptive and authoritative use of the Creole language. It is again a call for the freedom of creation, in its singularity and unpredictability. This ethical position is not grounded in a particular gendered difference but in an epistemological privilege of those who come from a marginalized position to protect their independence and lucidity as poets and artists. It is again a decolonial precursory approach of writing which I explore now in the following section with Gisèle Pineau.

III. Writing with the living presence of the ancestors or a decolonial approach of writing

> "Il fallait que je me débrouille dans ce marasme, il fallait que je traverse cette…**c'est comme une mangrove que je devais traverser.** Et puis j'ai trouvé en moi, puisque tous les mots étaient en moi, puisque les expériences, tout ce que je raconte, ça sort de mon imagination. Tout ce que j'ai inventé pour me consoler, pour me consoler, pour donner du sens aux choses aussi. "
>
> "I had to manage on my own, to navigate this mess. I had to cross this**… it was like a mangrove I had to cross**. And then, I found it in myself, since the words were always in me, since my experiences—everything I tell, it comes from my imagination. Everything I have invented, I did it to console myself, to console myself—to give meaning to things, too."[54] [My emphasis]

[52] Gisèle Pineau, "Ecrire en tant que noire", in *Penser la créolité*, 289-295.
[53] Holly Collins, "*La querelle de la créolisation,* Créolization vs Créolité in Glissant, Condé and the Creolists," *Nottingham French Studies* 56, no.1 (2017): 68.
[54] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.

Like the “mangrove trees”, commonly found in the Caribbean islands, (trees that have developed a unique adaption to survive the toxicity of the salty water and breathe in a swampy environment by keeping their roots up in the air), Pineau survived the toxicity of racism, ostracization and violence and kept “her head out of water” through writing. The suffering she endured led her to liberate the powerful potential of her creative talent. This retrospective analysis of her trajectory cannot valorize or legitimize the violence and pain she experienced, nor can it minimize her talent and the amount of work she had to invest in order to become a writer. Pineau is an exemplary model in the sense that she found the positive energy and balance to move on in life, and to stand against injustice. By giving us her story, she brings her own contribution to literature as a space to self-reflect and to advance social and racial issues in society.

Writing in the image of the mangrove allowed her to adapt and grow. Through the example of Gisèle Pineau, I would like to address the question of the “death of the author” as Barthes describes it and its survival through a decolonial approach to writing, that is writing in the presence of the ancestors and their living spirits. This approach develops outside of the prescriptive framework of a literary movement (the movement of Creolité in the case of Pineau), a particular language (the French language, or the Creole language) and outside the authoritative logic of a political affiliation or ideology. Writing for Pineau is a place of self-reflection of life, as much as it is the site where life reenacts itself. Particular attention is given to how Pineau mobilizes in her fictional work the poetic category of the *Relation*, a category that Edouard Glissant engaged throughout his work. This relational approach to literature

goes beyond a logic of representation to create possible worlds, and lives – a bio-graphy in the etymological sense of the term and literature. It nevertheless requires attention to historical context and the living presence of the author, for whom writing is not a vain aesthetic act but a place of thinking and living, or, as Audre Lorde expresses it : "Poetry is not a luxury."[55]

Life writing stories from Pineau (which could be extended to contemporary women writers in the Francophone Caribbean) certainly retain some features of the realist novels of the 19th century Europe: to represent or to portray people who were never the subjects of literature, to include them as subjects of art, to honor them as worthy of representation, and also to shed light on "real life issues." Indeed, by destabilizing the "legitimate" boundaries of art and literary writing, by challenging the classifying standards of the respectable "mirror image", the realist writers were advocating for the people to have their rightful place in literature. They were creating a more democratic "distribution of the sensible,"[56] while destabilizing the modes of representation and established hierarchies of aesthetic values. Questioning the ideological values of the bourgeois society, realist writers dignified the lives of people who were not considered at that time worthy of being represented in literature. Through fiction, the realist novel would achieve a function of mimesis, that is a reflection of a certain exterior reality. Hence, the realist text would entertain a close

[55] Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a luxury," in Audre Lordre, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 37. See also : Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14, no.1, (Spring 1988): 78-79.
[56] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London/New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010).

relationship with his/her author, as the one who records, notes, characterizes and paints the reality, and makes it "transparent" for the audience. However, Pineau does not only write to compensate for an absence or shed light on present-day issues. Her work attests to her preoccupation with history: her own individual history and the collective history of her people that has been distorted, repressed and has yet to be written from a subjective perspective. By relying heavily on her biography, Pineau does not narrate her personal story for the pleasure of narrating her own individual story or for the pleasure of anecdotes. Rather, she narrates her personal story to enlighten historical narratives as a way to create a living history, a real-life history, memories and histories that have been erased by the painful dominant colonial history and colonial narrative.

For a people born out of a traumatic shock (the slaveships' hold) and the plantation economy, two hundred years of slavery followed by the politics of assimilation lead to a deprivation of the opportunity to form a historical consciousness. This dispossession of a collective sense of time and history to identify with, has created, according to Edouard Glissant a "neurotic fear of the past".[57] To overcome this situation of non-history, Glissant convokes the writer and literature to search in the abyss of memory a past that is still haunting: "Because the collective memory was too often wiped out, the Caribbean writer must "dig deep" into this memory, following the latent signs that he has picked up in the everyday world."[58] Glissant, in this quote, emphasizes the role for the writer, as an archeologist, to exhume or reveal the

[57] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 66.
[58] Ibid., 64.

remnants and the traces of the past through an attentive observation of the social reality. This exploratory approach to fill in the gaps and silences of official History moves away from an historical method based on investigating a past from a distant point of view while collecting, recording and preserving historical remnants or information.

In order to uncover the hidden and repressed memory of Caribbean history, one cannot rely on recorded or preserved historical details but on the power of literary creation to explore the creative potential of the *Relation*. Indeed, in Edouard Glissant's philosophy, the category of the *Relation* is a poetic tool, or a counter narrative to the fantasied hegemonic History (with a capital H) of the Western colonial world which functions as a linear and dominant narrative. *Relation*, for Glissant, is not only this violent shock of multiple worlds put into contact with modern European colonization, establishing new links or connections between people, it is also a new way to produce time, a new narration of the world, as the linguist Jacques Coursil explains it:

> "The word 'Relation' in Glissant's language is not a logical link between two points. It is a narrative rather than a deductive and inferential category. It comes from the French verb 'relater,' which means, 'telling a story.' And more, as a noun, it defines, not a line but a space of time. More simply, one should use the word in the same fashion as when one says "living a love relation."[59]

Pineau's Memoir *Mes quatre femmes* gathers the four most important women of past generations in her life in the closed space of a jail: Gisèle her aunt; Julia her grandmother; Daisy her mother, and Angelique, her ancestor who survived the abolition of slavery. As critic Thomas explains, Pineau autobiographical essay exemplifies Glissant's theory of *Relation*: "Pineau's autofictional narrative

[59] Jacques Coursil, "Categories in Edouard Glissant's writings (2nd version)" http://www.coursil.com/bilder/3_language/Literature/Edouard%20Glissant%27s%20categories.pdf

demonstrates the redemptive possibilities of a Relational approach to one's life experiences, pointing to its role in overcoming historical and personal trauma."[60] In addition to the liberating effect that comes with uncovering, narrating and sharing her ancestors' experience while those narratives interconnect with each other, I would like to focus on how this relational approach operates in the writing itself, at the formal level, to create a new relation to time and history.

The epigraph of the Memoir reads: "La mémoire est une gêole./Là, les temps sont abolis. /Là, les morts et les vivants sont ensemble./ Là les existences se réinventent à l'infini." "Memory is a jail./There, time is abolished./ There, dead and living are together./ There lives are being fabricated endlessly."

Memory is a process with its own biases, as to remember inevitably means to forget. The metaphor of the jail can then be read at multiple levels. The book, while tracing the lives of the four female characters liberates them from "the jail of oblivion" where they had been confined and kept muted, erased, silenced (some for centuries like Angelique, the ancestor) in the personal and collective memory. La mémoire or memory can also be burdened by the weight of violence, fears and silence and the book frees the characters (the author and the reader in the meantime too) from the goal of deadly meanings that memory can retain. Gathered in a circle, four women of different generations who have encountered and dealt with the traumatic violence of colonialism in different ways, share their stories, one after the other. The jail then becomes a platform for dialogue, and the words of the four ancestors by encountering

[60] Bonnie Thomas, "Memory and Relation in Gisèle Pineau's *Mes quatre femmes*," *The French Review* 86, no.1 (Oct. 2012): 136.

each other can navigate to create new pathways, new meanings in the meandering of life. At the end of the book, the narrator engages the reader to question the stories, to destabilize their truth:

> Il ne faut pas croire toutes les histoires : pour beaucoup il ne faut pas les écouter. Mais quelques-unes rares sont soufflés par la voix des morts et des vivants. Ces histoires sont comme puisées à la source : joindre les mains pour recueillir l'eau qui s'écoule. Elles ont traversé des siècles de mots, des ères de silence, des nuits d'infamie. Elles ne craignent pas la nudité des écrits couchés sur le papier. Elles tracent leur chemin à l'encre de la vie, réelle ou rêvé. (*Mes quatre femmes* 184)

> "Do not believe those stories: don't listen to most of them. But some rare ones came exhaled by the voice of the dead and living. These stories are like water drew from the spring: join your hands to collect them. They crossed over centuries of words, years of silence, nights of abomination. They do not fear the nakedness of words lying down on paper. They draw their way with the ink of life, lived or dreamed."

Those stories, memory-traces of the past, belong to life and fiction. Indeed, the trace, in its geological condition, is likely to its own obliteration. Self-effacement is part of its own structure, allowing thereby a place for new traces over and beyond. "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace."[61] Situating herself in the trace, the author Gisèle Pineau appears as a "scriptor," someone who writes without entertaining a relation of possession and domination with words. But words uncover stories or other words that have been for a long time muted and forgotten. This forces the author to perform a return to the root ("des histoires puisées à la source"/ "stories drew from the spring"). It is not, per se, a return to the origin or "a historical

[61] Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs,* trans. David Allison (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 186.

investigation" even if it uses some of its methods (archival research to obtain the official documents attesting to the emancipation title of her ancestor for example). Neither is it the uncovering of an original meaning or an absolute truth. Instead, the new meaning is to be produced through the encounter, through the relation. It allows to reactivate, thanks to the power of words (their infinite capacity for change), new meanings, new lives. The power here is not in the text itself or its capacity of "re-presentation" but in its capacity to produce meaning in the movement of the words, in the dynamic of their own becoming. This unpredictable journey of the words allows us to comprehend history differently or to open up new meanings in history.

Writing the trace also means that the scriptor becomes her ancestors; it is through her voice that the multiple voices of the ancestors will speak.

> "Chaque mot est pour moi un espace largement ouvert, un paysage changeant, un voyage qui commence et ne s'achève pas, une trace qui ramifie et se poursuit dans d'autres imaginaires. Je suis toutes ces vies, toutes ces femmes, et aussi mère, grand-mère."
>
> "Each word is for me "an open space, a changing landscape, a journey that starts and never ends, a trace that ramifies and continues its way in other imaginative spaces. I am all those lives, all those women, and also mother, grandmother." [62]

Pineau's position is not an appropriation, or of speaking, but of listening. For that purpose, the author/scriptor transcends her own being to open herself up to the absent presence of the ancestors, to experience the unknown territory of slavery and its aftermath. Her goal is to honor them without the complex of superiority that is pervasive in the history of conquests and victories. Her goal is not to represent them as idealized characters or just victims but to make them live through the artifice of fiction

[62] Gisèle Pineau, "Je suis toutes les femmes," Interview by Willy Gassion, EWAG Media Positif, 2018 https://www.ewag.fr/2018/04/gisele-pineau-suis-toutes-femmes/

in all their human contradictions, with all their ambivalences, which is to respect their "opacity" : the characters can never be transparent and the reader, while reading is invited to participate in the debate, in the process of meaning-making, to create his own text or reveal another aspect of the narrative.

The literary text here comes to subvert and interrupt the historical text of official History that imposed its own single and violent meaning on events. But it is less to claim a point of origin than it is to attest to the multiplicities and complexities of histories and experiences that shaped the chaotic beginning of modernity in the Caribbean/France/the world in its entirety (the "tout monde") and to unravel the colonial stereotypes, prejudices and fears and their fixed, rigid and deadly meanings. Writing occurs in a hybrid space where words and meanings evolve, develop, enter in competition, respond to each other, but where no-one can locate a point of origin. To locate a point of origin would be to stabilize a single and rigid meaning to be found and comprehended through the author. Hence the meaning of the text does not belong to the author but is always ever evolving.

By destabilizing the auctorial authority, like Barthes did in his seminal text "the death of the author," Pineau also deconstructs the relation of individual property between the author and his/her text. The modern author or the scriptor no longer generates the text but "is born simultaneously with his text."[63] The language of the text refuses any paternalistic and authoritarian relation with the one engendering it: words emerge and travel on their own. They are no longer belonging or the property of one single meaning that the author would impose. The linear temporality between the

[63] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 52.

author and the past, the text and the present is disrupted. Words live in the eternal present of the utterance. Indirectly, Barthes and Pineau remind us that authorship is a very recent and Western category - words are not the individual property of the ones who utter them, especially in societies where oral traditions prevail (one can think of course of the tradition of the storyteller in the Afro Caribbean culture or the griot in Western Africa).

Barthes, by questioning to the masculine dominant power of the author as the only lens through which a text can be read, highlights the performative function of writing within the relational process of language, and the infinite potentiality of lives for a text as it circulates among readers across time and space. Emancipated from the individual relation of property between the words and the one who "inscribes" them, literature can finally exist for its own revolutionary purpose:

> "Thus literature (it would be better, henceforth, to say writing), by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a "secret:' that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law."[64]

The work of Pineau (and the Caribbean authors) forces us to rethink or resurrect the author momentarily, while still questioning the voice of the author as the voice of the "one". The voice of the author cannot be reduced to "one and single voice" but through him/her multiple voices and multiple lives. For Barthes (and we understand that his stance emerges in a context where the author was gaining too much authority in French academia, a dominant position of the author and the critic), God is on the side of the law, of a fixed, rigid single meaning that is oppressive,

[64] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 54.

totalitarian, exert violence and does not let the text breathe. But one can also see godly forces less on the side of law and authoritarian power of language than on the side of feminine power or creativity.

To impose a single and unique meaning equate to the killing of words and the death of the book. That is why Barthes prefers to "kill" the author in order to save the text, and prefers the term "scriptor", the one who leaves a trace that continues its life on its own and contains the means of its own self-effacement. However, I think the law/ God (if God is on the side of the law) are also the protector of life for a text– The law/God ["Thou shall not kill"- the law of non-violence- preventative rather than declarative] forces us to respect the infinite possibilities of meaning: the law is that there shall be no law – the law/God imposes itself by its own absence. Even a text on God shall be a text where there is no God, where God defines itself by the impossibility of a definition or an infinity of definitions. If the book/ God or divine creative forces are one, in attempting to grasp the meaning of a text, to fix it, to seal its understanding would equate to its death, to annihilate its future to come for the divine creative forces are the text/the word and are ungraspable.[65] Thus the paradoxical conclusion: the necessity of atheism for any text which comes with the refusal of idolatry. We can also think about the relation of filiation between the divine and life ; a parent and its children; the author and its text. To impose a meaning on a text would

[65] See Marc Alain Ouaknin : "Refusing the Idol-Text; or, The necessity of Atheism" and the quotation from Henry Atlan : "In all theism there is the danger of idolatry. All theism is idolatry, since expression signifies it, thereby freezing it; except if, somehow, its discours refutes itself and so becomes atheistic. In other words, the paradoxes of language and its meanings are such that the only discourse possible about God which is not idolatrous is an atheistic discourse. Or: in any discourse the only God that is not an idol is a God who is not God." (Henry Atlan, *Niveau de signification,* 86 quoted in Ouaknin, *The Burned Book*, 65.)

be to impose a direction and forbids so many others, a relation of possession and authority and the refusal of the infinite potentialities of life, death in the end.

With Pineau, I would argue that the enigma or the secret, if there is one is not indeed the ultimate meaning of the text as Barthes very clearly expressed it.[66] The secret or the mystery of creation does not reside in the text itself or the author or God or the reader but in the revelation of a new text to come, which is, to my mind, a point of intersection between the multiple voices that a text trace and the unlimited meanings that a reader can create. The secret lies in the infinite possibilities of the *Relation* (in the sense of the poetic category of the *Relation*, as Edouard Glissant would argue). And we could also add that the secret, if there is one, on the side of the scriptor as a novelist, resides also in the encounter between him/her and his/her characters from which results the revelation of a text to come, that is the point of intersection between the author and other human lives, which will produce new characters that the reader will, in his/her turn, encounter and bring to more lives. Thus, literature interrupts the linearity of time and the binary division of the visible and invisible/ death and life, past/present, personal memories/ collective history to inscribe the text in its future to come, not just for the interpretation of the text (as Barthes would insist) but the future of the words, of historical narratives and human lives. Literature as the spiral of words and lives.

L'Exil selon Julia is the first largely autobiographical narrative that focuses on the story of her grandmother Man Ya, a story retold in *Mes quatre femmes*. Paying

[66] For Barthes, nor the text, neither the author retains a secret, that is for him an ultimate meaning that have to be explained or discovered.

tribute to her grandmother, Gisèle Pineau expresses in her novels her gratitude for what she could learn through her. Paris, "capital of civilization," is not the dream of Man Ya. There she is seen as an oddity: a piece of furniture, reminder of the black code of slavery[67]:

> "Elle est là, inoffensive en quelque sorte, pareil à un vieux meuble démodé taillé grossièrement dans un bois dur. Un genre de commode mastoc relegué dans un coin de la cuisine depuis combien de générations." (*L'Exil selon Julia*, 15).
>
> "There she is, not troubling anyone, like an old outmoded piece of furniture, carved in a hard wood. A kind of cumbersome chest of drawers relegated to a corner of a kitchen generations ago." (Exile According to Julia, 6)

As submissive as she might have appeared to be, Man Ya had the capacity to disturb the categories of what was socially valued and devalued through the model of assimilation embraced by her own children, who believed in its promise. She troubled the literate/illiterate, educated/uneducated binaries because while she might not have been able to read and write, she was a teacher for her grandchildren regarding the history of the Caribbean. She was the literate one in her garden, a lesson in humility for Gisèle who learned from her the names of plants and their secrets. For her, the land of Guadeloupe became in turn the "promised" land, her garden in her village an Edenic paradise, in spite of the violence of her husband, while Paris appears as her purgatory, a "muted land" where time is oppressive. Man Ya is a model of faith for her capacity to produce time, to open up possibilities against the oppressive forces of official history and its tragic or fatalistic outcome; she is standing there to affirm that another alternative to the colonial/post-colonial time is possible.

[67] Know, as *code noir*, the *black code* was a decree established by the King Louis XIV in 1685 defining the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire.

> "Man Ya a foi en la justice divine. Elle sait qu'elle reverra Routhiers où son jardin l'espère. Elle incarne, sans paroles, l'idée que la force habite l'esprit, non pas le corps. Que regarder seulement la figure et la couleur des gens n'autorise pas l'estimation. Il y a ceux qui crient et battent, saccagent, accaparent, assassinent. Ils ont peur de la déroute du monde, de son aboutissement. La terre est leur geôle. Ils l'aiment et la haïssent et veulent vivre là toute leur éternité. Et puis il y a ceux qui font bouclier de leur personne, pansent les blessures, déminent les champs de l'existence. Ceux-là éteignent les peurs, sèchent les larmes, donnent l'espérance."
>
> "Man accepts her lot because she has faith in divine justice. She knows that she will once again see Routhiers, where her garden is waiting for her. She embodies, without words, the idea that strength lies in the mind, not in the body. That you cannot the worth of people just by seeing the way they look and their color alone. That it is risky to give credit to facile arguments. There are those who shout and fight, who plunder, snatch, murder. They fear the world's rout, its outcome. Earth is their jail. They love it and hate it and want to live there for all eternity. And then there are those who use their person as a shield, heal wounds, clear mines from the minefields of existence. Those are the ones who calm fears, dry tears, give hope."[68]

Against the materialist, physically abusive and predatory actions of colonialism for whom the earth is a jail and whose lives are caught up in the time of eternal present, through faith, she has the capacity to produce time. Here again she troubles the boundaries between freedom and slavery; the freed and the enslaved, for her body might appear enslaved, but is also resilient and her spirit is free.

In her seminal essay, Pineau acknowledges that her grandmother was a source of inspiration for all her fictional female characters. She is both the subject and the incentive or the catalyst for her writing :

> "Pour quelle raison la femme noire qu'était ma grand-mère Man Ya a tant voulu retourner auprès de son geôlier ? A travers mes portraits de femmes, je crois que je ne cesse d'explorer les hypothétiques réponses de cette question post-MLF. "
>
> "For what reason my grandmother, this black woman longed so much to return to her jailer? Through the portraits of women, I believe I keep exploring the hypothetical answers to this post-feminist question?"[69]

[68] Pineau, *L'Exil selon Julia,* 82; *Exile According to Julia*, 58.
[69] Gisèle Pineau, "Ecrire en tant que noire", in *Penser la créolité*. M. Cottenet-Hage & M. Condé. Paris: Khartala, 1995, 291.

What interested Gisèle Pineau in talking about her grandmother and her own experience as a child in the hostile environment of Paris was not to insist on her personal or individual story, but rather to explore the intimate theme of the family and very fundamental questions of human experiences regarding racism, violence, exile, and the aftermath of slavery and how her grandmother and Caribbean women play a role in troubling questions framed by a narrow vision of feminist emancipation. Through Pineau, we understand that her grandmother is a victim of domestic violence, but not a passive victim. She is able to make meaning of the negative situation her husband has experienced: the nature of the violence stemming not from the interpersonal relationship or individual characteristic but maybe collective external forces ("the eyes of the others"), that is the wider context of a violent society and exploitative economic relations, and the tragedy of the war.

> "Bourreau un jour tu verras les yeux du bondieu et tu devras répondre de tes actions. Mais peut-être qu'on le laissera pas aborder… Qui dit qu'on lui donnera deux ailes pour joindre le ciel ? (…) C'est pas la méchanceté qui l'a mis là, à me rosser. C'est peut-être les yeux des autres."
>
> "Torturer! One day you will see the God Lord's eyes and you will have to answer for all your actions. But perhaps they won't let him get to the other side. (…) It's not wickedness that put him here to trash me. Perhaps it is the eyes of others."[70]

Here, we see here Man Ya's capacity for compassion. In this way the reader is likely to think about domestic violence beyond the ill-will of individual actions. It encourages us to reflect about the complex and intertwined negative historical and social forces that plagues individual violent attitudes. From this particular issue and beyond the particularities of domestic violence as a heritage from slavery in the

[70] Pineau, *L'Exil selon Julia,* 119-20; *Exile According to Julia,* 88.

Caribbean, more questions are at stake, in particular with regards to silence, open resistance, and all the reactions in between. Pineau and her grandmother force us to see that there is a fine line between being a victim and choosing deliberately to ignore and rise above violence because silence or non-violent reaction (as a mean of last resort, as a sacrifice ?) can also mean resistance and patience in the sense of the intervention of a transcendental force or "une arme miraculeuse"/ "a miraculous weapon;"[71] She forces us to ask the question: What does it take to break the circle of violence and the tremendous imbalance it brings to life? In the context of slavery, generations of men have been deprived of their own right to be a father, to love their children and to hold legal matrimonial status. Women in bondage have been victims of rape at the early stage of deportation from Africa (a practice known as "la pariade") and all along and have been the ones who carried children of mixed race.[72] From this trauma and abuse, and the complex feelings it generated (from revolt, resistance to shame and guilt among other things), women are more willing to forgive and to love or stay unconditionally with men. In this context, those questions are particularly acute. But they are also inherent to any human lives and any historical context. It is not particular to the Caribbean that women have difficulties to report domestic

[71] Hélène Cixous talks about the word "patience" in French as homophonic to "pas -science", not science; to put it another way, to still have faith whatever science predicts. The quote from *L'Exil selon Julia* reporting Man Ya's voice could be read expressing her catholic faith: the existence of a divine justice and God judgement as redemption beyond the justice of men. As suggested by Jacques Coursil in his reading of the poem "Prophecy" by Aimé Césaire in his book of poetry "Les armes miraculeuses" , the "miracle" is less the idea of the literal accomplishment of a divine will than the capacity to "see through", the only and ultimate arm that a defenseless person has, a capacity . "To see" through the eyes, as a "mirror" effect (miracle and is to acknowledge the other's humanity (to depart again from a place of compassion) – the torturer, the executioner would always cover their eyes. The question of "the eyes" is also present in the quote. It is not "God" as an anthropomorphic entity that the torturer will see but the "eyes of God."

[72] Gisèle Pineau et Marie Abraham. *Femmes des Antilles; Traces et Voix cent cinquante ans après l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Paris: Stock, 1998).

violence, and for various reasons.[73] But the statistics and media coverage of domestic violence always tend to present the women as victims (which they are) and tend to conceal their agency. Of course, from Man Ya's story, we can see that emergency actions were taken: her son removed her temporarily from the situation, a radical action to interrupt the deadly circle of violence. It took courage from him to take this measure and so she agreed to the idea to be removed. But with resistance. She did not see herself as a victim; she still had faith that things could change for the better, even if she was not going to see it in her lifetime. From Man Ya's story, I can also see that there is a place for forgiveness as she was able to see a future for herself and not from the point of view of her son or the point of view of the "French idea" of assimilation that would reject her.

The narrative blurs the line between Man Ya's words and the author's interpretations of Man Ya's words. But I prefer to think about this narrative, not as the author imposing a dominant view on another person's narrative with whom she was very close, but as the result of her relation or a dialogue she had with this person. The author offers her first-hand account of her grandmother's words and interpretation about her words from her relationship with her; from what she learned from her. It is

[73] In France, the majority of the laws to protect women and to reinforce their protection (in terms of violence within the couple, divorce, abortion, rape…) have been the results of the recent battles won by the feminist movement starting in the 1970s. For example, it is only in 1975 that the first refuge for women victim of domestic violence opened in the Parisian suburbs. It is only in 1989 that public authorities launched a national public campaign of information with regards to domestic violence. For a chronology see: https://www.haut-conseil-egalite.gouv.fr/violences-de-genre/reperes-chronologiques-81/.
In my opinion, to advance further in this debate, as Pineau's books encourage, the particularities of violence in the Caribbean and within particular groups of populations (racialized people in continental France, lower middle-class people…) are important places to think and rethink further those questions at a more general level because the whole system also participates in the reproduction of violence within gender/class/race matrix of oppressions.

not to impose a narrative on her but to shift the dominant perspective, to open up a debate, to inspire the reader to think about the larger issues at stake on his/her own terms, to seek truth and to transform himself/herself through his/her reading of those words.

Writing her story, Pineau is herself a participant (and not a mere observer of her grandmother). From her own position, belonging to a subsequent generation, Pineau is able to take a stand with regard to history. She enlightens the reader with her own story in order to put an end to the deadly circle of violence, submission and injustice, because the cost of violence is too high. She also invites us, the reader to learn, as she herself learned, from the elderly women who have endured the pain of domestic violence: as Télumée Miracle (in Simone Schwarz-Bart *Pluie et vents sur Télumée Miracle*), Man Ya stands as "une femme debout", as someone who found in herself the means to have faith and find in herself the inner strength to advance in life from a place of love and not hatred. The story of Man Ya is a story to trouble the dominant, simple, easy narrative of the colonial binaries. It is a story in which the one who we believed to be the victim in the end is not really a victim and the ones who we believed to be the saviors (ie, the son, France, the General De Gaulle) are not the saviors. In spite of the violence, there is something to create in Guadeloupe. Faithfulness which equates to faith in the future, the unpredictable future and the love for the country is worth the return, or at least the return can be a possibility beyond the violence existing there.

Through Man Ya's testimony, the reader is able to educate himself/herself to learn from her experience, to get beyond the deadly colonial perspective to see that

there is a future beyond what we see as the "post-colonial". This future of the post-colonial is a "prophetic vision of the past" as Glissant would say or an ethical relationship to time: the capacity to see the past in a different way to open up the future, to re-read and re-think the past to keep faith in the future. The book bears witness to the realization of our flaws, that is indeed to realize our incapacity to fully comprehend the other or grasp the other in a fixed and rigid meaning (what Glissant calls the right to opacity). It also liberates us by creating a dialogue or a relation that is offering a space for creating something new (an a-venir: a future to come, an unpredictable future). The writings of Gisèle Pineau are transformative. Our capacity to see through – to shift the perspective - "the miraculous weapons" (to use Aimé Césaire's words) is the performative function of her book, which leads us to take action, to take our responsibility in our own life or to envision life with a broader perspective.

"Mes livres sont à l'image de la vie: on se bat, on prend des coups mais quand même on se redresse." ["My books are a reflection of life: one fights, one gets beaten but ultimately one stands back up."][74]

Gisèle Pineau's novels create characters who are on a quest for emancipation, a passage or a crossing, "the crossing of a mangrove," to use her aforementioned expression. Like Ulysses in the Odyssey, or in fairy tales, the main character encounters challenges on his/her quest (monsters, mermaids, cyclops and violent natural disasters). The novels are a journey, a "grande drive", an errancy, an exodus, the beginning of a dynamic, of a long walk that will "take the character somewhere".

[74] Gisèle Pineau, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Pierre-Elliot Caswell, May 2017.

This nomadic movement, through which the word "travel" becomes itself the travel, does not land anywhere while it still goes somewhere. The journey is not just a travel narrative, the landing of the words in a form of being, but the dynamic of its own being, a becoming. The meaning of the journey/of the book/ of the words belongs to its own capacity to produce meaning. Pineau explains that errancy does not mean an eternal deprivation of a place (she insists that "we land somewhere") –This "somewhere", the destination of the journey, is not defined but to be created.[75] The "somewhere" is not the final word but a word to become.

> "Les personnages, tous mes personnages dans tous mes romans se construisent grâce à l'expérience, aux épreuves qu'ils vont traverser, et tout ce qu'ils vont rencontrer sur leur route. Ils vont se construire et c'est la solitude aussi, c'est tout seul. On va se construire mais tout seul. Au bout du compte, on va traverser comme Ulysse, on va traverser mais il y aura des monstres, il y aura des sirènes, il y aura des cyclopes et puis il y aura une mer démontée. Et on va arriver quoi. Il y a toujours quand même de l'espoir. Et souvent mes lecteurs me disent, oui Madame Pineau, vous écrivez des choses terribles, je dis oui mais il y a au moins trois pages d'espoir à la fin. Effectivement, mais on accompagne l'héroïne ou le personnage principal, on l'accompagne comme ça, on est avec ce personnage, on est tout près de son souffle, on est tout près de de…de son cœur qui palpite. Mais il arrive, il va quelque part, il va quelque part. Et il traverse pour grandir, pour se construire, pour se comprendre, pour accepter aussi que le passé, l'enfance, n'est pas le lieu, n'est pas ce territoire où il doit errer en permanence. Il doit abandonner, arrêter de se poser en victime. Il doit laisser ça parce que ce passé là il ne peut pas le changer. C'est ça aussi, vraiment c'est ce qu'on retrouve dans mes livres. "
>
> "The characters, all of my characters in all of my novels, use their experience, the hardships they must go through and those they will encounter, in order to become who they are. They will shape themselves and it's also aloneness, being alone. To become who you are, but on your own, alone. And, at the end of the road, you will cross, like Ulysses. You will cross, but there will be monsters, sirens, cyclops, and a raging sea. And you will get there, you know. Very often, my readers tell me: "Yes, Ms. Pineau, you write about terrible things." And I say: "Yes, but there are at least three pages of hope at the end." It's true, but you accompany the heroine or the main character, you accompany them, just like that: you are with this character, right on their breath, right next to… to their beating heart. But they are getting somewhere,

[75] My reading of Gisèle Pineau has been enriched by Marc-Alain Ouaknin philosophical reflections on the Talmud, more specifically for this part on the travel of "holy Ark"- the Ark of the covenant built to hold the Law (the tablets of stones inscribed with the 10 Commandments – which were shattered once by Moses as a refusal of idolatry). See the chapter "An Atopian Text, " in *The Burnt Book*, 151-154 and more particularly these relevant passages : " The word "journey" is no longer simply a word! It is the journey itself. The words of "journey" express the journey of words. The story of the Ark is atopian, for the dynamics of meaning, dynamic in its very essence (…) The dynamics of meaning is contemporaneous with the dynamics of the being-man, of his ability to generate the meaning. (…) the nomadic truth, in the process of becoming, is outside of any place." (Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, 152-153.)

> they are going somewhere. They are crossing in order to grow, to shape themselves, to understand themselves. But also to accept their past—childhood is not this place, it's not this territory where they must dwell forever. They must abandon it, they must stop victimizing themselves. They must leave the past behind because they cannot change it. This is, also, what it is about, you know? What you find in my books."

This wandering or 'crossing of the mangrove' is a metaphor for separation from the land of a deadly past and of childhood, used to raise one's consciousness to grow or to move toward one's own creation. Exile is the condition for a human being towards their own emancipation. To become is first to exit (the self, the past), a rebellious act or a quest for one's promised land, which is not an ontological relation to a physical territory, nor does it originate from idol worship of a land but from the freedom, promise of words of liberation.

In conclusion, tracing Pineau's successful career allows us to enlighten the social and material conditions of her vocation. Like Maryse Condé or Simone Schwarz-Bart, she grew up between the French and Caribbean culture, in between Guadeloupe and Paris. Part of the following generation, she benefited from literary models she could identify with, a favorable context of publication in the 1990s and positive reception of the movement "La créolité". Writing beyond the aesthetic pleasure comes with a sense of urgency at an individual and collective level, to survive the violence inherited from the colonial history and slavery. Her work is decolonial in the sense that it forces us to rethink the categories inherited from the colonial period and to emancipate from them.

CHAPITRE 4

WRITING BEYOND BORDERS, YANICK LAHENS AND THE DECOLONIAL TURN IN HAITIAN LITERATURE

Born in 1953 in Petionville Haiti, Yanick Lahens moved to France as a teenager and returned to her native island after having completed her university degree. Appointed Professor of Literature at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* of Port au Prince up to 1995, she is part of a new generation of writers who live in Haiti. She has always been very involved in cultural and civic activities in her country. With her award-winning novel *Bain de Lune*[1] and more recently her lectures in Paris at the *College de France*,[2] Lahens is a leading voice of Haitian literature, and one of the most prominent contemporary Haitian female authors. Through her works of fiction, which includes four books of short stories and five novels, Lahens explores the challenges and questions that emerge from the reality she experiences in Haiti. This reality, in the context of permanent crisis (at all levels: political, economic, social, environmental) reveals the immense divide between a privileged minority and a marginalized majority. This internal division rooted in economic social and racial inequalities reflect more broadly the immense inequalities existing in a world shaped by the legacy of colonialism and global capitalism.

[1] Yanick Lahens, *Bain de Lune* (Paris: Sabine Wespieser, 2014) / *Moonbath*, trans. Emily Gogolak (Dallas: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2017).
[2] Yanick Lahens, *Littérature Haïtiennes: Urgences d'écrire, rêves d'hâbiter. Leçon inaugurale du Collège de France* (Paris: Fayard, 2019).

This chapter will explore Lahens' literary creation and writing career from the liminal space she occupies in Haiti, an in-between and uncomfortable position, on the edge of a privileged and Western world. It is from this contrapuntal position, in between languages, class, race and gender from which she self-reflects and writes. How can literature be a place of reflection on the existential and collective question of exile in a context of blatant social inequalities? How can Haitian literature promote a renewal of the decolonial project it has endorsed from its inception, in an attempt to rethink the conditions of emancipation in a contemporary context?

I. Social Trajectory of Yanick Lahens

Yanick Lahens social biography exemplifies the inequalities that exists in Haitian society and how she experienced it on an individual level. Her family and school experience while growing up in the privileged circles of society attest to a condition of a certain type of social exile ("privilege is a foreign land" as she likes to state publicly[3]). However, the education she received (open to the larger popular culture in Haiti) will create the possibility of developing a critical eye on the existing social and racial hierarchies; a critical eye that will develop while studying literature in Paris and later as a professor and literary critic in Haiti.[4]

[3] Yanick Lahens, "5 questions pour île en île", interview by Thomas Spears, Jan. 15, 2009. Audio, 26:00. http://ile-en-ile.org/yanick-lahens-5-questions-pour-ile-en-ile/

[4] All the information with regards to Yanick Lahens' biography comes from the interview I had with her in Petionville, June 8, 2018, and a radio interview with Elise Gruaud: Yanick Lahens, "Episode 1: l'ancrage dans Port-au-Prince", interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue*, France Culture, Nov. 11, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-15-lancrage-dans-port-au-prince

1. Growing up in a middle-class family under the Duvalier Regime

Like most female writers of her generation, Lahens was raised in a middle-class family,[5] "the little bourgeoisie of color", recently established in the urban area of Port-au-Prince. She was born in her family home in Petion-Ville on December 22, 1953, which at that time was only a village. Her maternal grandparents came to Port-au-Prince from the northern cities of Gonaïve and Port-de-Paix. Her grandfather spent his career in the military as a captain in the army, and her grandmother was a tradeswoman. Possessing great talent in the art of cooking and baking, she taught her daughter (Yanick's mother), who would later own a successful catering business.

Her father's family came from the south of the country. Her grandfather was a schoolteacher, and her father experienced an important upward mobility. As a laureate of his promotion at the University of Port-au-Prince, he was able to pursue his studies on a scholarship to complete a PhD in Economics in Paris, France. Upon his return,

---

Yanick Lahens, "Episode 2: Haïti une histoire déniée et retrouvée", interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue*, France Culture, Nov. 12, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-25-haiti-une-histoire-deniee-et-retrouvee
Yanick Lahens, "Episode 3: Haïti microcosme du monde", interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue*, France Culture, Nov. 13, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-35-haiti-microcosme-du-monde
Yanick Lahens, "Episode 4: Etre sur la brèche, écrire sur la faille", interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue*, France Culture, Nov. 14, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-45-etre-sur-la-breche-ecrire-sur-la-faille
Yanick Lahens, "Episode 5: Urgence(s) d'écrire, rêve(s) d'habiter", interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue*, France Culture, Nov. 15, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-55-urgences-decrire-reves-dhabiter

[5] Regarding the formation of social class in Haiti, see Micheline Labelle, *Idéologie de couleurs et classes sociales en Haïti* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987), http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/labelle_micheline/ideologie_de_couleur_en_haiti/ideologie_de_couleur.html.

when Yanick Lahens was 4 years old, he worked as a professor at the University of Port-au-Prince and in public administration at the highest level.

Though Lahens' family had achieved material security and valued the Western standard of education for its promise of upward mobility, they were nevertheless not cut off from the Haitian popular culture with its diverse and composite elements. Lahens remembers a happy childhood surrounded by an extended family (her maternal grandparents, her uncle who lived with them and her maternal great-grandmother) in a welcoming home open to visitors. She describes the environment she grew up in as a "lakou", a term that designates the extended family group in rural Haiti, a space shared with different neighboring houses and organized around "the court" ("la cour" in French).

Lahens' mother created and celebrated Haitian popular dishes in her own business. From wedding cakes to "pintade aux djon djon" (guinea fowl, a bird favored over chicken that is cooked with a special mushroom from Haïti called "djon djon") that she re-named "pintade neg marron" (to celebrate the days of independence),[6] she was one of the first to raise Haitian traditional cuisine to a refined status.

Lahens' family would also listen to an eclectic variety of musical genres: from classical European music to traditional Caribbean music to French ballads.

Although belonging to the Catholic faith, her family did not go to church regularly and nor did they hold any contempt against other religions, including Vodou, which was at that time demonized by the Catholic church. The family encouraged her

[6] See also: Yanick Lahens, "Haïti, les désirs de la table," *Libération*, Mar. 16, 2018, https://next.liberation.fr/food/2018/03/16/haiti-les-desirs-de-la-table_1636751

to take classes in traditional Haitian dance offered in her neighborhood, although this practice clashed with the social norms of respectability at the time. Yanick remembers indeed having been ashamed by three Catholic nuns when she had performed publicly at the French Institute of Port-au-Prince. The school administration summoned her parents, who did not give in, and because of her excellent school standing, Lahens was not expelled. Her family encouraged her to pursue dancing which would later become an important source of inspiration important for her writing as a theme and aesthetic (the theme of dance and emancipation appears in her first novel *La maison du père,* 2000). In this way, her education and perspective on Haitian culture was broader and more exceptional than what was generally taught at school and was probably exceptional in that sense. Contrary to most of the upper middle class, her family valued, respected, and honored the "other" Haiti that was not seen from a denigrated point of view. Instead of perpetuating negative stereotypes, they welcomed and embraced the various and multiple composites of cultural elements of Haitian society in a positive way as cultural wealth.

Navigating through this in-between space (part of a privileged family, but not immersed; on the borders of Haitian popular culture), Lahens became sensitive to the different forms of discrimination and symbolic violence rooted in the racial and social hierarchies, the invisible borders that divide Haitian society: first in the private circle of her family with the presence of a house employee who had her own room, a socially divided space within the house, the colonial legacy of a service society, modeled after the colonial system of house servants. Later at school, she socialized and established friendships across the color and social lines. As a child from a privileged family, she

received an education in French at a Catholic private school,[7] Sainte-Rose de Lima, an educational institution that taught at its founding the sons and daughters of the great mulatto bourgeoisie of Port-au-Prince. After 1957, it opened its doors to a more diversified population.[8] Despite this change, Lahens remembers children from the dominant mulatto class experiencing favoritism, while the children of color were highly penalized. Poor grades compromised their abilities to advance to higher grade levels, meanwhile their parents were making great efforts to finance their education. Lahens concludes that from the school experience she realized that : "it is a society of discrimination."[9]

School in Haiti has been one of the main institutions fostering the inequalities of the colonial system, a system that has supported a divide between the elite and the majority of the population, a divide between urban areas and the countryside, and a divide between the sexes. When Haiti achieved independence in 1804, the nation made a remarkable effort to build its own educational institutions. Support for education was a priority, reflecting the ideals of freedom and emancipation for the Haitian people. It was also considered the best way to prove to the imperial European world the mark of its civilization.[10] Teaching in the French language in school attests to not only the linguistic heritage of their colonial history, but also to its inscription in the social and political hierarchies of the whole country and within its institutions (the

[7] In the interview Yanick Lahens also noted that considering the lack of the public education system, the state only funded 10 % of the schools, while 90% were private institutions.
[8] Micheline Labelle, *Idéologie de couleurs et classes sociales en Haïti* 67.
[9] Yanick Lahens, "Episode 1: l'ancrage dans Port-au-Prince", interview by Elise Gruaud. Nov. 11, 2019.
[10] Hurbon, *Culture et dictature en Haïti*, 82.

state, the school and the church). During the 19th century, the emerging public school system benefitted a privileged minority belonging to the mulatto class, reproducing the gender, class and geographical inequalities in the country, while most of the education system was left to the private sector and virtually inaccessible to the rural population.

With the agreement between the Haitian state and the Catholic Church (Concordat concluded with the Vatican in 1860), Catholicism was made the State religion of Haiti in exchange for educational aid. Congregations were welcomed in Haiti to establish schools, which received financial support from the Haitian state and reinforced the power and prominence of the Catholic Church in the Haitian school system, creating a Christian elite. Two systems evolved: one system in an urban setting established by religious orders trained the elite whom were sent to these private schools; and one in the rural areas attached to Catholic presbyteries to teach the sons and daughters of peasants to acquire the basics legitimate official French education.[11] At the end of the 19th century, in 1894, only 8% of the 400 000 children and the young population in Haiti attended school[12].

Additionally, girls for a long time were kept away from education. After the revolution, the patriarchal system inherited from the colonialism remained. Equality was not extended to women, and the political and economic model reinforced the separation between women across class and racial borders. Those who belonged to the privileged elite were confined to the restricted space of their homes as housewives,

[11] Hurbon, *Culture et dictature,* 83. See also: Job Clément, "History of Education in Haiti: 1804-1915 (First Part)." *Revista de Historia de* "History of Education in Haiti: 1804-1915

[12] Louis-Auguste Joint, "Système éducatif et inégalités sociales en Haïti. Le cas des écoles catholiques," *Recherche et ressources en éducation et formation,* 2 (2008): 19.

legally dependent on their husbands through marriage. Among the popular class, women participated actively in the economic survival of the extended family and were responsible for independent businesses. In the agricultural areas, women along with children were in charge of growing coffee, Haiti's first export product following independence. They lived aside the civil law of marital union and European family model (norm of "plaçage" that is consensual unions according to customary law).[13]

It is only during the American occupation (1917-1934) that the first official feminist movements began to emerge. Within the actions of the Patriotic Union, Haitian women of the upper middle classes came together in cities to protest the "total domination" of the American occupant, while men and women from the peasantry were leading an active military resistance in the countryside.[14] In 1934, a group of 10-12 upper class educated and active women created the first official feminist organization in Haiti: the "Ligue Féminine d'Action Sociale." While the league addressed the concerns of elite women, in particular those regarding civil law and marriage the Ligue also worked in a more inter-class orientation to promote the emancipation of women, collaborating with working-class female labor unions.[15] They fought for the right to vote which they obtained in 1950. Education was also at the forefront for the Ligue, specifically the opening of schools for girls. In 1943, thanks to

[13] Madeleine Bouchereau. *Haïti et ses femmes, une étude d'évolution Culturelle* (Port-au-Prince: Presses libres, 1957), 67.
[14] Danièle Magloire, "L'antiféminisme en Haïti," in *Déjouer le silence. Contre-discours sur les femmes haïtiennes,* ed. Sabine Lamour, Denyse Côté and Darline Alexis (Montréal: Les Editions du remue-ménage/Mémoire d'encrier, 2018): 199.
[15] Natacha, Clergé. "Pour en finir avec une historiographie héroïsante: critique de l'historiographie féministe traditionnelle," in *Déjouer le silence. Contre-discours sur les femmes haïtiennes,* ed. Sabine Lamour, Denyse Côté and Darline Alexis (Montréal: Les Editions du remue-ménage/Mémoire d'encrier, 2018): 228-9. See also Paulette Poujol-Oriol

their efforts, a high school for young women opened in Port-au-Prince and by 1944 traditionally male high schools opened their doors to girls in the capital.[16]
Lahens grew up at a moment in time when education for girls was expanding in Haiti, although François Duvalier's rise to power (in 1957) put an end to the feminist activities of La Ligue and the efforts toward improving access to education.

Lahens experienced the Duvalier regime in a rather ambivalent way. Her close family initially sympathized with the promise of his "noiriste" political platform for a more equal society.[17] But, she also had close family members who died, victims of the Duvalier political repression, like her godfather who had participated in a failed attempt to overthrow the government during his time in the military. She also remembers school closings, curfews and a tense political climate. Growing up in the presence of politics, she explains:

> "Je suis née dans une famille politique, donc très tôt j'ai démystifié le pouvoir en tant que tel, qu'il s'agisse du pouvoir économique, du pouvoir politique ou du pouvoir intellectuel. Très tôt, j'ai été absolument sans illusion sur cette chose-là."[18]
> "I was born in a political family, so at a very early age I demystified power as such, whether it is economic power, political power or intellectual power."

Her hesitation with regards to politics came from her life experiences in proximity with political power at an early age. She will continue to favor this realistic position after the fall of the autocratic Duvalier regime. She has always kept her distance with

[16] Myriam J.A. Chancy, *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997: 41.
[17] Her father became Secretary of State for Trade and Industry between 1965 and 1973 during the Duvalier father regime and his son's early years. See: Yanick Lahens, "Yanick Lahens: toujours ancrée" interview by Nadève Ménard in *Ecrits d'Haïti. Perspectives sur la littérature haïtienne contemporaine (1986-2006),* ed. Nadève Ménard (Paris: Editions Kharthala, 2011), 194.
[18] Lahens, "Yanick Lahens: toujours ancrée", 194- 195.

any political party, and stands away with any ideology with a narrow narrative that excludes the common good of the people.[19]

2. Paris, academic and intellectual formation

Sent to France to complete high school and university (a decision motivated by the troubled political climate of the time), Lahens left Haiti at the age of 15. She attended a Catholic boarding school in Boulogne-Billancourt (the southern inner suburbs of Paris) and then studied literature at the Sorbonne University.

This physical exile from Haiti would reveal other realities about her country and the silent heritage of the colonial history of France. She describes this period as a learning experience as she acquired a critical perspective on both her native country and her host country. During her school years in Paris, she realized striking contrasts: first of a Haitian school system that disproportionately valued the French language. Having excelled above her classmates in composition in high school, Lahens understood that her success was partly attributable to a strong emphasis on grammar and hypercorrection imposed when she was learning French, an official but second language in Haiti that was overtly praised.

She also remembers taking a course at the university on "The witch" as an enlightening critical thinking experience:

[19] In the interview with Elise Gruaud, she confides: "Tout chemin trop étroit de classe ou de race mène à un chemin de sang." "any class or race narrow passes lead to a bloody way" Lahens, "Episode 1: l'ancrage dans Port-au-Prince". She also explained to me : "Je n'ai jamais milité dans un parti et je pense que je mourrai sans avoir milité dans un parti."/ "I was never an activist and never belonged to a party and I think I will die without campaigning for a party." (Lahens, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Alex Lenoble, June 2018).

> "Le cours de Jacques Seebacher sur "La sorcière" de Jules Michelet m'a fait comprendre le processus de mise sous silence, de baillonnement, de mise à l'écart de majorités entières: les sorcières mais pas seulement, les Juifs, les Maures aussi. Tout ce qui ne rentrait pas dans un paradigme de definition étroit de ce qu'est l'homme, allez sur le bucher ou bien on en parle pas!"
>
> "Jacques Seebacher's class on "The Witch" from Jules Michelet revealed to me the process of silencing, of sidelining of entire majorities: the witches, but not only, Jewish people, the Moors, everything that did not fit into the paradigm of narrow definition of what is a human being… now at the stake or the law of silence!" [20] [my translation]

Jacques Seebacher, born in a working-class family and a militant in the communist party for twenty years, was a teaching assistant at the Sorbonne University in the early years of his academic career. Highly praised and recognized for his charismatic teaching qualities, Seebacher was part of this generation of scholars who, in the intellectual effervescence of the 1960s, broke free from the conventional methods and modes of thinking at the university.[21] A specialist of 19th century literature, he contributed to a re-reading of classic authors such as Victor Hugo through the lens of the renewed critique (with the contribution of his contemporary critical thinker such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser). Seebacher also revived the 19th century Michelet essay on *the Sorceress*, a work that he called " thanatology against thanatocraty"[22] to unveil the long silencing process of history. Lahens found this class particularly enlightening because she could relate to a somewhat similar silencing process with regards to Haiti and French imperial history. Indeed, the silence

[20] Yanick Lahens, "Episode 1: l'ancrage dans Port-au-Prince", interview by Elise Gruaud. Nov. 11, 2019.
[21] Jean-Didier Wagneur, "Un brin de causette autour d'Hugo," *Libération* June 17, 1993, http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/Groupugo/Textes_et_documents/JS/Lib%C3%A9ration.pdf
[22] Jacques Seebacher, "Le côté de la mort ou l'histoire comme Clinique," *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 74e Année, no. 5 (Sept. - Oct. 1974): 819.

surrounding the Saint-Domingue revolution resonates in parallel or in echoes, revelatory of a French amnesia concerning its own colonial past:

> "Mon premier choc, ça a été à l'école quand je faisais mes premiers cours d'histoire, il y a peut-être une phrase sur la révolution de Saint Domingue alors que, la révolution c'est quand même trois années d'histoire en Haïti. Alors je me dis, c'est quand même incroyable qu'un fait aussi important, pas seulement de l'histoire française mais de l'histoire du monde, parce que c'est quand même la troisième révolution des temps modernes, après la révolution américaine, la révolution française, il y a la révolution haïtienne qui pousse plus loin l'idéal des lumières. "
>
> "My first chock was when at school, when I was taking my first history class, there is maybe one line on the Saint-Domingue revolution, whereas the revolution is at least three years in Haiti. So I told myself: "it is after all incredible that such an important fact, not only in French history but in world history, because it is indeed the third revolution of modern times, after the American revolution, the French revolution, there is the Haitian revolution which pushes forward the Enlightenment ideals." [23]

This silence is telling about the workings of power and the production of authorized knowledge and historical narratives. [24] For example, an analysis of a sample of 65 history books from 1857 to 2011 confirms Lahens' experience. The study concludes "No event of that importance has been so deeply obliterated from the memory of the French people than the first colonial war".[25] The 2001 Taubira Law which characterizes slavery as a crime against humanity initiated a change in the French educational system. However, while school programs and history books now cover the topic of slavery and its abolition, a complete silence endures even in the present with regards to the political conflict, the slave revolt and the war of independence in Saint-Domingue which resulted in the first Black Republic of Haiti.

While Haitian history was absent from the curriculum, Haitian literature was completely absent in the early 1970s. Lahens was nevertheless able to complete her

[23] Yanick Lahens, "Episode 2: Haïti une histoire déniée et retrouvée," interview by Elise Gruaud.
[24] See also Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 1-30.
[25] Jean-François Brière, "La Révolution haïtienne dans les manuels scolaires français, 1857–2011," *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 23, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 32-56.

master's degree in modern literature with a research project on the 20th century author Fernand Hibbert under the supervision of the Professor René Etiemble who learned as much as she did:

> "C'était difficile de trouver quelqu'un à l'époque. Finalement, il a appris avec moi, il découvrait la littérature haïtienne avec moi, parce que lui c'était le spécialiste, un des premiers de littérature africaine, donc il découvrait la littérature haïtienne avec moi. "
>
> "Yes, absolutely, but it was difficult to find someone at the time. Finally, he learnt with me, he discovered Haitian literature with me, because he was the expert, one of the first in African literature, so he discovered Haitian literature with me."[26]

Lahens' years in Paris were very formative, not only for the academic experience she gained but also for the encounter with various aspects of Haiti that she did not know of:

> "Là où j'ai fait mes études, j'ai rencontré beaucoup d'Haïtiens. Donc j'ai découvert des tas d'aspects d'Haïti que je ne connaissais pas.(…) D'abord les étudiants que je rencontrais, ct souvent des gens qui étaient partis parce qu'ils avaient fait la grève en Haïti, beaucoup des exilés politiques, donc c tout un pan d'Haïti que je ne connaissais pas. J'ai beaucoup appris moi aussi sur Haïti à partir de la France. (…) Il y en avait qui faisait leurs études, d'autres étaient beaucoup plus âgés que moi mais tout le monde se regroupait et mon groupe d'âge, étudiants d'Haïti, on avait relancé l'association des étudiants haïtiens à Paris, donc tout le monde se regroupait autour de cette association, ça a été un bon moment. Donc là il y avait toutes les tendances politiques, ceux qui étaient très à gauche, à gauche, ceux qui n'étaient pas à gauche jusqu'à une certaine limite. Tout le monde s'est retrouvé et on a fait beaucoup d'activité. Des activités culturelles, beaucoup. Des débats, on avait avec nous Hervé Denis, qui étaient dans la troupe de Jean-Marie Sérault, donc c'était quand même quelqu'un qui avait une très belle formation en théâtre, donc on montait des spectacles, il y avait beaucoup de choses. Je me souviens aussi de la projection de Gouverneur de la Rosée quand Telvic a fait gouverneur de la rosée, il y a eu une projection dans le cadre de l'association.
> (…) Mais on faisait des débats politiques oui. Il y avait des gens comme, Serge il qui était dirigeant de la Cimade, on accueillait les réfugiés, il y avait les gens du PUCH parti communiste Haïtien qui étaient là. C'est là que j'ai rencontré René Théodore. "
>
> "Oh yes, a lot even. I studied there, it was there that I met a lot of Haitian people who I would certainly not have met in Haiti. So, I discovered a lot of aspects of Haiti that I wasn't previously aware of. (…)First the students I met, they were often people who left because they went on strike in Haiti, a lot of political exiles so it's a whole side of Haiti I didn't know about. I can say that I too learned a lot about Haiti when I was in France. (…) Some of them were studying. Some of them were way older than me and in fact worked. But everyone got together and in my age group, students from Haiti, we revived the Haitian Students Association in Paris, so everyone gathered around this association, these were good times. So there was every possible political orientation, well, those who were far left, left, those who were not left to a

[26] Yanick Lahens, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Alex Lenoble, June 2018.

> certain extent. Everyone gathered and we had a lot of activities. (…) Cultural activities, a lot. Debates, we had with us Hervé Denis, who was, who worked in the theatrical troupe of Jean-Marie Sérault, so he was someone who had very good theatrical training, so we set up performances. There were a lot of things. I also remember the screening of *Gouverneurs de la rosée*. When Telvic did *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, there was a screening organized by the association. (…) There were political debates but we had them more on the side because we didn't want to disturb the functioning of the association. (…) Serge, he was the leader of Cimade, we welcomed refugees, there were people from the PUCH, the Haitian Communist Party who were there. There, I met René Théodore for the first time. At the time, I didn't even know, he was totally living clandestinely so he had an alias when he came."[27]

The experience of Paris was critical to Lahens formation as a professor, literary critic and writer. It was in Paris that she expanded her reading of Haitian, Caribbean and South American studying comparative literature. She was the first Haitian woman to read and develop a critical view of Haitian literature at a university level. Her experience of Paris was also an opportunity to develop a critical view of the French colonial world and her own native island which inherited its structures. Upon her return to Haiti, she pursued a career as a professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Comparative Literature. A professor and literary critic until 1995, she also participated in promoting reforms that would introduce creole at school. Before the publications of her first works of fictions (a short story collection), Lahens produced an important body of critical work on Haitian literature: an essay "L'exil" [28] and numerous articles on Haitian literature.

From her in-between position, as a woman, distant from any political affiliation but very close and sensitive to social and racial inequalities in Haiti and in the world, Lahens developed, as a literary critic and then writer, a singular approach to

[27] Yanick Lahens, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Alex Lenoble, June 2018.
[28] Yanick Lahens, *L'exil entre l'ancrage et la fuite, l'écrivain haïtien* (Port-au-Prince: Editions Deschamps, 1990). The English version: Yanick Lahens, "Exile between Writing and Place," trans. Cheryl Thomas and Paulette Richards, *Callaloo,* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 135-46.

literature in order to think beyond the colonial legacies of Haiti and the contemporary postcolonial world.

3. Becoming a writer in Haiti

Lahens came to write and to publish later in life. Her first book of short stories *Tante Résia et les Dieux* was published in 1994, once she had already a career as a professor of literature. She is part of a generation of women writers belonging to the upper-middle class, educated in the French language and who began to writing in the 1990s after the fall of the Duvalier's dictatorship.

It bears noting that Haitian women writers have come recently to writing, an absence and invisibility that literary history reinforced. When poetry was the dominant aesthetic form in the 19th century, Virginie Sampeur, known for the masterpiece she authored "L'abandonnée" and an autobiographical novel "Angèle Dufour" is the only female poet that literary history recognized and remembers. Ida Faubert (1882-1969) whose talent first developed in the literary and the high society of Port-au-Prince, was a member of the generation of "La Ronde." Her first poems were published in the journal "Haiti Littéraire et scientifique" (1912). She settled in Paris in 1914 where she became an active member of the literary avant-garde. She hosted a literary salon where she entertained close ties with the Haitian literary circles in Paris and developed relations with surrealist poets and French feminist and lesbian writers such as Anna de

Noailles and Colette.[29] Her poems and a book of short fictions on Haiti were published in 1959.

From 1915 to 1934, the American occupation of Haiti imposed a censorship that weighed heavily on writers, and particularly women writers who did not yet have a literary voice.[30] The colonial context nevertheless gave way to a nationalist movement that created opportunities for women to engage in politics and for the feminist movement to develop. The political occupation also inspired this generation of women to publish, opening the way for a feminine voice in Haiti. Some of these women included Virgile Valcin (who was the first woman to write a novel, *Cruelle Destinée*, the first novel published by a woman in 1929), Annie Desroy (known for her novel on the American occupation *Le Joug* published in 1934), Paulette Poujol Oriol and Marie-Thérèse Colimon, to name only a few. One woman in particular, Marie Vieux Chauvet, devoted her entire time to literary creation, removed from any political or feminist engagement. Born in 1916 and daughter of a prominent politician of Port-au-Prince, Chauvet began writing a theater play in 1947 under a pseudonym. She would then write several award-winning novels: *Fille d'Haiti* (1954), *La danse sur le volcan* (1957), *Fonds des Nègres* (1961) and a groundbreaking trilogy *Amour, Colère, Folie* (1968) and a posthumous novel *Les Rapaces* (1986). Chauvet's access to the Parisian literary field at the end of the 1960s fell short: while the manuscript of

[29] On Ida Faubert's life and poetry, see: Natasha Tinsley, "Open Roses, Closed Gardens, and Invisible Women: queering the tropical garden in the poetry of Ida Salomon Faubert," *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 23, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 52-57. See also: "Ida Salomon Faubert" biographical essay by Danielle Legros Georges in *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Franklin W. Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[30] Chancy, *Framing Silence*, 17.

Amour, Colère, Folie had been accepted by the French Publishing House *Gallimard,* her family bought all the copies of the first edition published by *Gallimard* for fear of political repression.[31] She chose to migrate to the United States, while many other writers and intellectuals took refuge in Canada or France. It was only recently that critics and the Haitian audience rediscovered her work. She also had a key influence in Lahens' decision to write and publish. Lahens was one of the first to rehabilitate the work of Marie Chauvet in the 1980s and to bring to critical attention to the aesthetic innovation of her novels, in part because of the censorship it faced. Her critical texts are not only important scholarship in Haitian studies but also, as the interview confirms, a springboard for fictional writing:

> "***Et est-ce que vous avez toujours pensé devenir écrivain ou c'est quelque chose qui est venu plus tard?***
> Bon j'écrivais des petites choses mais pas vraiment l'intention de publier.
> ***A partir de quel âge ?***
> Je m'en souviens plus. J'ai publié…je crois c'est en lisant un peu Marie Chauvet que ça a déclanché quelque chose et après avoir écrit mon essai « L'exil, Entre l'ancrage et la fuite ». Là je me suis dit : « bon tu te jettes à l'eau ! "

> "***And have you always thought of becoming a writer or was it something that came later?***
> Well, I wrote small things but not really with the intention of getting published.
> ***From what age?***
> I don't remember. I published… I think it was when I read Marie Chauvet that something clicked and after I wrote my essay "Entre l'ancrage et la fuite." Then I told myself: Ok, take the plunge."[32]

II. Thinking beyond borders as a literary critic

[31] For more on the complex publishing history of *Amour, Colère, Folie*, see Rose-Myriam Réjouis, translator's preface to *Love, Anger, Madness: a Haitian Trilogy,* by Marie Chauvet (New York: Modern Library, 2009), xix-xx; Thomas Spears, "Marie Chauvet: The Fortress still Stands," *Yale French Studies*, no.128 (2015): 9-24.
[32] Yanick Lahens, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Alex Lenoble, June 2018.

While positing some clear and original tools to envision Haitian literature in a new fashion, Lahens, in her essay "Exile: Between Writing and Place" (1992) also advances positive arguments facing the contradictions and paradoxes that are inherent to the uncomfortable position of the Haitian writer (and in general writers from colonized parts of the world), at a time when literature was mostly written in French and the fact of a privileged elite when the vast majority of the population spoke creole. In this section, I will enlighten the position Lahens takes in her critical essay to understand her decolonial thinking and writing approach.

1. The limits of a defensive position or utilitarian function of literature

It is generally accepted that the declaration of Haitian independence was the first act of writing and sealed the birth of the Haitian nation as well as the birth of literature in Haiti. By defeating the Napoleon's troops and declaring the end of colonial rule and slavery, Haitian revolutionaries not only put an end to the physical violence they had to face but also the colonial discursive justification. By defeating the course of violence inscribed in the system of oppression, the insurgents managed to bring forth the impossible and opened the first crack, the blind spot in the philosophy of Enlightenment.[33] In order to radicalize the Enlightenment project required a challenge to the monopoly of universalism and the material profits from which France benefitted. On top of being a political act, the 1804 Independence Act of Haiti was also an ethical one, a relentless effort to self-define a subject whose subjectivity had been negated, and whose human condition had been forced into exile. "Let's dare be

[33] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past,* 70-107.

human" ["Osons être des hommes"], claimed its author Boisrond-Tonnerre in a now famous expression. This self-definition was not to be conceived in an abstract and universal terms but to ultimately survive, to put an end to the "banishment" from humanity. In this context, the right to be "human" means to ultimately survive and free oneself from the slave condition. Haitian literature as a declarative act of existence calls forth the reversal of a set of representations, or viewpoints, aimed at redefining the idea of culture and civilization in a world where the right to speak and to write had never been shared. The Haitian text disrupts at its core the way literature is conceived, far from a *Belles Lettres* or European humanism that conceived the human subject in an abstract term.[34] By entering in the conversation with their own words, by taking the floor, Haitian revolutionaries were writing their own counter-history. Since then, Haiti and its literature has been relentlessly focused on fighting back the forces of degradation and annihilation. On the international scene, France recognized the independence of Haiti more than twenty years after the defeat of Rochambeau troops in 1825 and for the price of 150 million francs,[35] a crushing debt from which Haiti would only be free only in 1945. Great Britain formally recognized the Haitian nation in 1833 and the U.S. only in 1862 after the secession of the Southern slave states. In the Caribbean and other colonial areas of the world, Haiti became an example, "the place were Negritude stood up for the first time."[36] On the other side, the colonial

[34] Yves Chemla, "Comment la littérature haïtienne nous apprend à penser autrement", accessed February 26, 2021, http://www.littafcar.org/actualites/503/comment-la-litterature-haitienne-nous-apprend-a-penser-autrement/
[35] Ordonnance de S.M. le roi de France, concernant l'indépendance de l'île de St. Domingue, du 17 avril 1825.
[36] Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land.*

perspective saw the uprising and violence brought about by the war of independence as another fall in the state of nature, proof of the "sub-human" status of the former slaves. The idea of the "threatening return of the barbarians" continued to prevail as France and other European nations were about to expand their colonial and Christian civilizing influences in Africa.

Lahens, while taking into account the importance of Haitian literature at its beginning, points out the limits of a defensive position by writers seeking to assert their humanity and establish a counter narrative to colonial violence. Lahens explains:

> "Our writers lingered over this defensive attitude for a long time in order to speak in the name of a group they wanted incessantly to prove belonged to humanity as full members. Radical assertion of existence and claims to recognition in the Hegelian sense. The rejection of the master's culture which had forced them to disdain their origins, made these nineteenth-century theoreticians the precursors of indigénisme, négritude and noirisme. If their stances were justified in the context of the period, they nonetheless incited writers to silence all individual speech while dulling their true capacity for innovation. Such that in the West, we are still perceived as the "Others," a formless magma, a univocal and monochord whole, in brief, as **barbarians**."[37] [My emphasis]

Writing occurs from a collective perspective and occupies a utilitarian function. It remains locked up and dependent on the other's response. Repressing the impulse of individual imagination to explore the infinite possibilities of language to produce meaning not only limits the vital and creative potentiality of literature, but becomes counterproductive. To remain in an expected defensive position is to remain the "other," that is, "barbarians."

Lahens reminds us that for a people that came together out of the experience of the Middle Passage and the slave plantation, exile is a constitutive dimension of the Haitian culture along with resistance and syncretism. To consider the importance of

[37] Lahens, "Exile," 742.

exile forces one to rethink how to inhabit a land and form a community. In Haiti, being an exile does not means being torn apart between two places but deprived from a lost place of origin. It makes it impossible to take roots or to develop an ontological relation to the territory. It is an experience that undermines the formation of a stable identity in relation to a fixed place or the reassuring sense of unity at both the individual and collective level:

> "Besides the fact that they force one to recognize as fundamental the feeling of the precariousness of here as much as that of the inaccessibility of elsewhere, these contradictory movements spare no class, no group. They threaten at the same time the ideal of a stable identity capable of being mastered at a given moment as well as fantasies of an individual or a group forever reconciled to themselves."[38]

The themes of exile and travel in the novels of the first part of the 20th century, according to Lahens, proclaim this void, this incapacitated relation to the world conceived as a lacking or a deprivation of a lost origin or the fantasy of a reconciled identity. Like the defensive position, literature would then fill in a utilitarian function: expiation or redemption in a mimetic discourse that idealizes the fixity of an identity based on a territory. Literature does not create, does not trouble or subvert meanings but only imitates, an "exercise in pure style":

> "Thus, for the writer literature resembles for a long time only an exercise in pure style which gets in the way and ruins one of the very functions of literature which is to be that place where contradictions, emotions and dreams are spoken and (both in the sense of games and of theater) play themselves out. But this language does not inhibit the writer because where he keeps silent about his urges, his agonizing struggle, or his interior drama, he still allows an essentialist or messianic message to pass. Hence one has the right to ask the question: does this writer inhabit the French language?"[39]

To ask the question: "Does the writer inhabit the French language?" for Lahens does not cast doubt on the aesthetic or linguistic quality of the literary work but on the

[38] Lahens, "Exile," 736.
[39] Lahens, "Exile," 737.

capacity of literature to express an "interiority", an internal point of view that can capture the most pressing desires, frustrations, contradictions, the crises and questions of an individual and a people in search of its own way of being to the world, its own emancipation.

2. **The impasses of the indigenist movement**

The Indigenist Movement came as a turning point. For its founding father, the medical doctor, writer and ethnographer Jean-Price Mars, the objective was to rehabilitate the African heritage in the Haitian culture. His seminal work, *Ainsi parla l'oncle. Essais d'ethnographie,* denounces the "collective bovarysme" and the long-standing alienating prejudices against Haitian popular culture.[40] It would encourage a new generation of authors to turn their eyes to the Haitian countryside and to find in the folktales, legends, creole languages and the Vodou religion the source of inspiration for their literary materials and to manifest a new love for the country.

Founded in the spring of 1927 by Jacques Roumain and Daniel Heurtelou, the journal "*La revue indigene,*" gathered young male poets, members of the elite, educated in French and who had generally studied in European universities. Versed in French literature, they aspired to break from the long tradition of imitation of their predecessors. While pursuing the French cultural influence and legacy, emphasizing its geographical inscription on the American continent, the movement also embraced

[40] Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla l'oncle. Essais d'ethnographie,* (New York: Parapsychology Foundation Inc., 1928), 10, 12, http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/price_mars_jean/ainsi_parla_oncle/ainsi_parla_oncle.html.

South American literature and sought to bring forth its own contribution to the Latin civilization.[41] Open to the world and the aesthetic renewal of poetry (Italian or Russian Futurism, Indigenismo in South America, the Harlem Renaissance), the movement was also preoccupied with the affirmation of a Haitian "identity". Valuing the traditions and cultural practices of the countryside, Haitian poetry welcomes for the first time the creole language, oral rhythm, and the African heritage.[42]

Although Lahens acknowledges the context of the time and the aesthetic innovation of Indigenist literature, she sees two limits to this movement. While honoring the popular culture, it relies on a viewpoint that still endorses a symbolic framework and a European ethnocentric vision that considers popular traditions and culture as a mythic reservoir of eternal values, belonging to a world of orality, a "primitive" stage doomed to be overcome. Devoid of a questioning of exile, Haitian Indigenism establishes literary models tied to a narrow definition of identity that limits aesthetic research. In its Marxist version, Indigenist literature delineating a political agenda may constrain the writer in choosing freely the literary form. Literature in its messianic function serves the political cause while potentially repressing personal expression. In its Noiriste version leading to the political platform of the Duvalier regime, it reproduced the prejudices of racial superiority in favor of a Black Haitian culture to monopolize the political power, while keeping the people at bay from any political participation. Far from being a critique of the European racist discourse, the "Noiriste ideology" re-endorsed its categories and instrumentalized the popular

[41] Georges Castera, "L'indigénisme haïtien, un point de vue contradictoire," *Notre Librairie* no32 (Oct.-Déc. 1997): 77-9.
[42] Georges Castera, "L'indigénisme haïtien", 86-7.

culture, and Vodou in particular, as a tool of propaganda. Abroad, it came to comfort the narrative of Haiti as a "barbarian" state. Inside the country, Vodou was used as a diversion to better control and repress the Haitian people in a regime of terror.[43]

3. The radical turn of Haitian literature and the feminine voice of Marie Chauvet

It is, according to Lahens, the poet Saint Aude who "was one of the first to inaugurate poetry as an adventure who dared to take to the high sea, convinced that a writer who remains in the harbor is a dead writer."[44] Inspired by the surrealist poetic revolution in Europe, the literary group "Haïti Littéraire" thought of poetry as possessing infinite possibilities of language and creation. Later, the Spiralist Movement with the leading poets, Franketienne, René Philoctète and Jean-Claude Fignolé, relied on the idea that language fails in its capacity of representation.[45]

Lahens observes that Marie Chauvet's *Amour Colère Folie* (1968) and Franketienne with *Mur à crever* (1968) were the first to introduce the techniques of the interior monologue in the novel and assert the writer's autonomous artistic voice. Literary innovation breaking away from a defensive position gives the writer more freedom and autonomy. Disengaged from the political injunction, the writer is able to

[43] Dany Bebel-Gisler and Laënnec Hurbon, *Culture et Pouvoir dans la Caraïbe. Langue créole, vaudou, sectes religieuses en Guadeloupe et en Haïti* (Paris*:* L'Harmattan, 1976), 112-113, http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/hurbon_laennec/cultures_et_pouvoir/cultures_et_pouvoir.html
[44] Lahens, "Exile," 743.
[45] For more on Franketienne and the spiralist mouvement, see: Kaima Glover, *Haiti Unbound: a Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011); Alex Lenoble, "US occupation and Franketienne's Schizophrenic Writing", *Journal of Haitian Studies* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2015) : 322-349; Jean Jonassaint, ed., *Typo/Topo/Poéthique: sur Franketienne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008).

paradoxically further pursue a political denunciation and renew in this way the collective project of decolonization. To inhabit a language differently goes precisely along with the idea of inhabiting the country differently, and this literature provides space for meditation and the promise of a radical decolonial thinking.

According to Lahens, Marie Chauvet's novels paved the way for the modern novel in Haiti[46]. The initial reception of her trilogy *Amour, Colère, Folie* and the criticism it provoked based on immorality of the female character speaks to its subversive content:

> "She unsettled everybody, on the right, the left, not to mention a majority of her own relatives. The book was rejected when it came out. Even [Pradel] Pompilus, for instance, could not do it justice. Some called it scandalous. They could not see how important it was that someone dare say openly such things in a first-person narrative. They could not follow this consciousness in quest of itself. All they saw was the story of a "hysterical" woman, an amoral one at that; whereas, in fact, she is extremely lucid when it comes to her society and politics. She is a character who dares communicate openly her innermost thoughts in a long monologue and who dares even name her own desires."[47]

Here Lahens points to the social transgression and novelty of Marie Chauvet's writing and the way she approaches socio-political reality. Privileging the intimate sphere and point of view, Chauvet gives her characters the psychological density, complexity and ambiguity that was absent from the novels of her predecessors. In a rupture with ideological constructions of the Indigenist and the magical realism of Jean-Stephen Alexis, Chauvet did not belong to any feminist group either and notably the *Ligue Feminine d'Action sociale* (*Feminine League for Social Action*). This stance

[46] Yanick Lahens, "L'apport de quatre romancières au roman moderne haïtien," *Journal of Haitian Studies,* 3/4 (1997-1998): 87-8.
[47] Yanick Lahens, "Haitian Literature after Duvalier: an Interview with Yanick Lahens," interviewed by Clarisse Zimra, *Callaloo* 16, no.1 (Winter 1993): 85.

away with regards to ideological constructions does not ignore the political questions. On the contrary the denunciation of social, sexual, and racial taboos intensifies through this individual and intimist lens.[48]

One example illustrating this point is from her novella *Amour*.[49] In her private diary, the main character Claire Clamont registers the frustrations and fantasies of her spinster life, in a lucid attempt to exorcise the burdens of her prejudiced mulatto bourgeois upbringing and the claustrophobic atmosphere of domesticity and terror from the newly in-place repressive regime. The setting is provincial, and the perspective remains confined in the bedroom, the family house, the neighborhood, and the small city. The new commander, Caledu, a source of fascination as much as repulsion for Claire, embodies the brutal state violence against the traditional mulatto elite, women and the poor peasant class. This scathing portrait is nevertheless carefully replaced in the broader context of the longstanding violent history birthed by French colonialism, as this quote exemplifies:

> "Nous nous exerçons à nous entr'égorger depuis l'indépendance. Les griffes du peuple se sont mises à pousser et se sont acérés. La haine entre nous est née. D'elles sont sortis des tortionnaires. Ils torturent avant d'égorger. C'est un héritage colonial auquel nous nous cramponnons comme au français. (…) Combien de gens a-t-il assassinés ? Combien ont disparu sans laisser de traces ? Combien sont morts dans des conditions atroces ? (…) A leurs cris, comme à ceux des prisonniers, mon sang bouillonne, la révolte gronde en moi. Déjà je haïssais mon père de fouetter pour rien les fils des fermiers. "[50]
>
> "We have been practicing cutting each others' throats since Independence. The peoples' claws began to grow and became sharpened. Hatred among us was born. From it came our torturers. They torture before they slaughter. It's a heritage we hold fast to, like the French language. But we excel in the former, and we are still mediocre in the latter.(…) How many people has he murdered? How many disappeared without a trace? How many have died under unspeakable

[48] See also Kaima L. Glover, " 'Black' Radicalism in Haiti and the Disorderly Feminine: the Case of Marie Vieux Chauvet," *Small Axe* 40 (Mar. 2013): 15.
[49] Marie Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère, Folie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).
[50] Marie Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour,* 14.

> conditions? (…) My blood boils at the sound of their cries and those of the prisoners – rebellion grumbles in me. This goes back to the days when I hated my father for whipping the sons of our farmers for next to nothing."[51]

In this passage, the patriarchal authority of the commandant "Calédu" embodying the political and sexual repression of the Duvalier regime,[52] whose cruelty aims specifically at annihilating any subversive desires or actions, is not far removed from the violent patriarchal authority of her father against the sons of the farmers who worked for him. Whiplashes, a common practice during slavery, persists as a colonial heritage along with the French language. The senseless violence comes back repeatedly, with even more intensity, like the haunted return of the repressed.

Acknowledging the inherent vulnerability that comes with the condition of exile ("a permanent oscillation between anchorage and flight"), Lahens demonstrates that accepting this in-between position ruins the foundations of any discourse on an identity that could be defined in fixed and rigid terms. She invites the writers to break away from a cognitive category that limits literary creativity. Like the innovative poets or writers such as Franketienne or Marie Chauvet, along with the new generation of male or female writers that came after the end of dictatorship, Lahens is not promoting a "pure" aesthetic project outside the socio-historical realities of Haiti. For her, artistic emancipation goes along with a larger effort of reconsidering the social/racial divide within Haitian society, and to a broader extent the relationships between the individual

[51] Chauvet, *Love*, 14

[52] In his analysis of the novel, the critic Jean Jonassaint explains that the name "Caledu" signals the intricacies of the political and sexual violence as the word "Kaledu" in Creole means "to beat harshly" but also refers to the popular expression "a penis in erection". See: Jean Jonassaint, "De la complexité caribéenne, notes sur une impasse théorique," *Francophonia* 49 (Fall 2005): 49.

and the collective, the "modern" writer and its place in society. A writer is not the individual figure, a sacralized genius cut off from the common fate, exiled in his ivory tower, but a "man or woman among others." Lahens invites us to rethink the question of the individual and the collective, not as two mutually exclusive categories. The singularity of the author can only emerge from this tension, this liminal position between the collective and the individual, not from an individual position that would remain cut off from the collective.

> In effect, in a world where exacerbated individualism has set the self against humanity, where hedonistic narcissism sets the writer's exile against the social order, it is still a privilege of our societies to permit the writer to consider himself a man among other men. Can our literature be this space where individualism and humanism do not exclude each other? And what if we broke with the aesthetics of powerlessness? What if we opened the sphere of imaginary territory by first accepting exile and thereby the alterity within ourselves?[53]

Lahens' essay engages in a critical effort to assess and elaborate a clear-sighted vision of the challenges and accomplishments of Haitian literature within its historical context. It is from this place of challenges that she envisions its force and potential to produce a literature that defines for itself its own "nomos", its own foundational principle (Bourdieu), apart from the political and colonial discourse. This literature cannot reduce itself to a counter narrative. To shift the perspective regarding questions of exile means to acknowledge its reality while also envisioning it from a positive perspective. It is an effort to call attention to the issues of exile, and in doing so, embrace a discomfort, while being able to see the creative potential of an ambivalent position and of the multiple ways to belong in the world. To rethink exile means to

[53] Lahens, "Exile," 745.

think beyond the "inside/outside," "individual/collective," "the other/ the self," artificial binaries. It forces one to maintain the contradiction of an in-between situation, to take advantage of the dynamic of its movement, that is the movement of meaning beyond the artificial borders of two antinomic positions. To put it in another way, rethinking the question of exile helps Lahens see its positive force: being in exile can be seen as a space, or a movement of distance and proximity from which one can enter in relation with the other. This movement does not intend to reduce the other to the self but conditions its relation. Exile forces one on a quest for balance and equilibrium. This thinking open to the *Relation*, open to its future-to be, is based on the recognition of the political and epistemic failure of any ideological thinking, too narrow or too rigid, that would deny the other any alterity or any capacity to exist and to speak. In that sense, Lahens invites us to envision a literature that embraces decolonial thinking. It is on this path that she inscribes her own literature and in particular her novel *Bain de lune* published in 2014. During the interview I had with her, she confirmed her decolonial approach, more aligned with Marie Chauvet and other Caribbean women's writing:

> **"*Oui pour finir, je voulais un peu parler de Bain de lune. Je me demandais, parce que l'écrivain se fait un peu la voix de ceux qui n'ont pas accès …et en même temps l'écrivain parle au nom d'une réalité qui n'est pas forcément la sienne …comment cela se joue ?***
>
> En fait, c'est un roman un peu décolonial parce que même quand Roumain parle, c'est une 3ème personne qui parle. Là j'ai renversé la perspective. Cette personne-là, j'ai essayé de décrire, comment cette majorité voit le monde, comment elle se vit…
>
> ***Mais vous parlez en leur nom, c'est la même chose pour le sociologue pour…comment tenter d'être au plus près…je sais que vous avez fait beaucoup d'entretiens…***
>
> Ben oui ça demande du temps, ça demande du temps. Parce qu'on est tous formaté pour ne pas comprendre.
>
> ***Voilà oui et des représentations qui pèsent depuis des générations…***

On est vraiment formaté pour ne pas comprendre. C'est pour cela que j'étais même très étonné est-ce que les gens, surtout en France vont comprendre ? Il y en a qui n'ont pas compris. Ils ne comprennent pas les rapports homme/femmes là-bas. Ils s'imaginent Simone de Beauvoir… Leur expliquer que la majorité du monde ne fonctionne pas selon le modèle de Simone de Beauvoir, c'est pas évident. "

"Yes, to conclude, I wanted to talk a little but about *Bain de lune*. I was wondering because the writer talks for those who don't have access …and at the same time the writer talks about a reality that is not necessarily her's… how does this play out?
Actually, it is a bit of a decolonial novel because even when Roumain talks, it is a third person who talks. Here, I inverted the perspective. This person, I tried to describe how this majority sees the world, how it experiences itself…

But you speak in their names, it is the same thing for the sociologist for… how to be as close as possible… I know that you worked with a lot of interviews…
Well, yes, it takes time. Because we are all conditioned not to understand.

Yes and representations that weigh since generations…
We are really conditioned not to understand. It is the reason why I was very surprised, will people, especially in France will they understand? Some didn't. They don't understand men/women relationships there. They think Simone de Beauvoir… Explain to them that the majority of the world doesn't work according to Simone de Beauvoir's model is not easy. (…) They don't understand. In the case of an urban novel, they get more into it. Maybe in Haiti as well, the young city dwellers preferred *Guillaume et Nathalie* and *Douces déroutes*. It is closer to their universe. That's it."[54]

III. *Bain de Lune*: a decolonial approach to writing

1. A shift of perspective

Lahens' decolonial aesthetic project is grounded in the socio-economic history of Haiti, her lived experience and her commitment to support literary creativity as truly autonomous and independent from the Western/French canon, a vision that she delineated in her critical essays. In that sense, she aims at reviving the initial decolonial spirit that was at the core of the Haitian revolution, to create something new, beyond the limits of what is expected or thinkable. In her lectures on Haitian

[54] Yanick Lahens, Interview by Elise Finielz, trans. Alex Lenoble, June 2018.

literature in Collège de France, she refers to Subaltern Studies[55] and Gayatry Spivak essay *Can the subaltern speak?*[56] However, nowhere (in her lectures or interviews), does she mention any ties to Decolonial Studies in the American academy, although she used the term "decolonial" to characterize her novel *Bain de Lune*. Nevertheless, I would situate her critical stance as a decolonial critique because she rejects any essentializing or rigid and defensive position (whether Eurocentric or anti-colonial thinking) and advocates for a "critical border thinking" or the integration of perspectives, otherworldliness, spiritualities from and with (rather than "about") the subaltern group of Haiti, cast as *Moun Endeyo* [literally: people on the outside – the excluded].

Initially a short story published in 1999 (in a short stories collection entitled *La petite corruption*[57]) Lahens turned *Bain de Lune*[58] into a novel that was published in 2014, acclaimed by the critics. It won the Femina prize. In preparation for her novel, she devoted long years to reading and listening to works from historians, sociologists, anthropologists, vodou priestesses, and community members, attentive to academic discourses and discourse from the community. She traveled frequently within the country, especially in villages of fishermen near Anse rouge (in the northern part of

[55] The Subaltern Studies Group, whose intervention was crucial in the development of Postcolonial Studies, emerged in India in the 80's around historian scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty…The group aimed at uncovering the historical contribution of the underclass, in particular the peasants, who had been marginalized in the colonial and national historical narrative of India, in order "to produce historical analysis in which the Subaltern group were viewed as the subject of history" (Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography." *Nepantla: Views from South,* 1, no. 1(2000): 15.)

[56] Gayatry C. Spivak, *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory,* ed. Patrick William and Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 66-111.

[57] Yanick Lahens, *La Petite Corruption (huit nouvelles)* Port-au-Prince: Editions Mémoires, 1999.

[58] Yanick Lahens, *Bain de Lune,* (Paris: Editions Sabine Wespieser, 2014).

Haiti) and on a particular island: the island of the Cayemite (in the southern part). Through this "travel in the inlands,"[59] to quote the author, the inlands of Haiti and her own inlands/ her own (intimate) "inlands", Lahens' poetic writing is a testament to her engagement in bridging the gap between the rural and privileged world in Haiti. This was an effort to break away from the colonial problem of social/racial exclusion within the Haitian borders and to renew the decolonial project in literature.

In 1804, when Haiti became independent, around half or two thirds of the free men and women of Haiti were "Africans."[60] Once the colonizers were expelled, an internal colonization replaced the French one, as the model of civilization brought by the Europeans predominated among the mulatto class who guaranteed its permanence and continued to look towards Europe to build its political regime, administrative institutions, and the structures of the plantation economy, while social, racial and gender hierarchies continued to prevail.[61] On the other hand, the Bossales' population settled in the mountains on small scale property and established a counter-plantation model at the margins of Western culture and very close to their lost African way of life. It is these conditions that created a de-facto situation of internal situation of social and racial exclusion within the Haitian nation.

By shifting the perspective and using the first person (singular and plural), the novel aims to not only make visible to the reader the reality of the living conditions in

---

[59] Yanick Lahens, "Yanick Lahens-Bain de lune," filmed Sept. 29, 2014, Youtube video, 4:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZRuNDXAYmI

[60] Gérard Barthelemy, "Le rôle des Bossales dans l'émergeance d'une culture de marronage en Haïti," *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* 148, no. XXXVII-4, (1997): 839

[61] On the hegemony of the French model of civilization after independence in Haiti, see Laënnec Hurbon, *Culture et dictature en Haïti. L'imaginaire sous contrôle*. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1979), 51-54, http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/hurbon_laennec/culture_et_dictature_en_Haiti/culture_et_dictature_en_Haiti.html

the rural areas of Haiti but also to show how this group views the world. By reversing the perspective from the eyes of the peasants, Lahens participates in deconstructing the cultural legacy inherited from a colonial/post-colonial era that produces an essentialized vision of the "Haitian" people that would have passively submitted to history as *moun endeyo*. Outside and within, this unstable "I" and "Nous" in *Bain de lune* disturbs the narrative of social exclusion to give a more complex picture of an always-changing reality: those who are cast outside live also in an "in between," coping with a changing landscape, growing economic pressures and political disillusions toward a political system that seem to be attentive to their material destitution but in reality always failed in their political promises.

2. Writing with and beyond *Gouverneurs de la rosée* by Jacques Roumain

Bain de lune, set in the Haitian rural areas, appears to the critics as a peasant novel and thus establishes a dialogue with Jacques Roumain's masterpiece *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*[62] considered a classic of genre in Haitian literature. The critic Jason Herbeck demonstrates in an intertextual analysis focusing on environmental issues that Lahens' text echoes that of Roumain's stylistically and thematically.[63] While rebuking its utopic and idealist outcomes, Herbeck concludes

[62] Jacques Roumain, *Gouverneur de la Rosée* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie d'Etat, 1944)/ Jacques Roumain, *Masters of the Dew,* trans. Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook (New York: Reynal & Hitchock, 1947).
[63] Jason Herbeck, "Intertexts of the ecological," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 23, no. 2 (fall 2017): 81-106.

that the novel still retains an imaginative potential as a work of ecocriticism. His analysis falls short, however, in the reading of Lahens' subversive critique of Roumain's novel in a more general decolonial perspective, which also includes environmental questions along with a more complex picture of race/class/gender power relations. That is why I would like to examine this intertextual dialogue in the light of Lahens' critical thoughts and her reflections on the question of social/racial and gender inequalities in the Haitian society around the world. My decolonial reading sheds further light on Lahens' decolonial writing approach.

Renewing the perspective on the rural world and the environmental issue

Roumain's masterpiece, *Gouverneurs de la rosée/Masters of the Dew,* although stylistically innovative, nevertheless provides a stereotypical and simplified vision of the Haitian peasants and their socio-economic status. Manuel, the protagonist, undertakes revolutionary actions that he situates in the long-standing Haitian tradition against colonial oppression and cosmopolitan internationalism in the Caribbean[64]:

> "Ce pays est le partage des hommes noirs et toutes les fois qu'on a essayé de nous l'enlever nous avons sarclés l'injustice à coup de machette."[65]
>
> ["This land is the Black's man. Each time they've tried to take it from us, we have cleaned out injustice with the blades of our machetes."[66]]

[64] Valerie Kaussen, "Slaves, *Viejos* and the *Internationale*: Modernity and Global Contact in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée*," *Research in African Literatures* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 121-41.
[65] Jacques Roumain, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (Paris: Editions Messidor, 1946), 69.
[66] Jacques Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, trans. Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook (Portsmouth: Heinemann, Caribbean Writers Series, 1978), 74.

However, Manuel's own political formation took place on the sugar cane plantation in Cuba. While the sugar cane plantation model was predominant in the early years of colonization in Haiti,, after independence, coffee replaced sugar as an export product. In the first part of the 20th century, most of the peasants lived off of subsistence agriculture on small properties they owned. In *Gouverneurs de la rosée,* the peasants are doomed because of a fratricidal war over the inheritance of the land and their neglecting agricultural practices:

> "Je dis vrai: c'est pas Dieu qui abandonne le nègre, c'est le nègre qui abandonne la terre et il reçoit sa punition: la sécheresse, la misère et la désolation."[67]
>
> "That's the truth. It's not God who betrays us. We betray the soil and receive his punishment: drought and poverty and desolation."[68] states Manuel.

He later finds a spring and imagines a system of irrigation to save the community, who in an extraordinary movement of solidarity is able to reconcile and regenerate:

> "Nous sommes misérables, c'est vrai. Mais sais-tu pourquoi ? A cause de notre ignorance : nous ne savons pas encore que nous sommes une force, une seule force : tous les habitants, tous les nègres des plaines et des mornes réunis. Un jour, quand nous aurons compris cette vérité, nous nous lèverons d'un point à l'autre du pays et nous ferons l'assemblée générale des gouverneurs de la rosée, le grand coumbite des travailleurs de la terre pour défricher la misère et planter la vie nouvelle."[69]
>
> "We are miserable, that's true. But do you know why, brother? Because of our ignorance. We don't know yet what a force we are, what a single force –all the peasants, all the Negroes of plain and hill, all united. Someday, when we get wise to that, we'll rise up from one end of the country to the other. Then we'll call a General Assembly of the Masters of the Dew, a great big *coumbite* of farmers, and we'll clear out poverty and plant a new life." [70]

This argument of the peasants as responsible for its destitution remains caught in a stereotyped vision even today. For example, Herbeck's article endorses the

---

[67] Roumain, *Gouverneurs de la rosée,* 37.
[68] Roumain, *Masters of the Dew,* 45.
[69] Roumain, *Gouverneurs de la rosée,* 70.
[70] Roumain, *Masters of the Dew,* 75.

dominant but inaccurate narrative present in *Gouverneur de la Rosée* noting how the agricultural practices of the farmers (the production of charcoal) lead to deforestation.[71] This practice exists but what Herbeck's analysis omits is the more complex dynamics at stake (on a local but also global scale) regarding deforestation beyond the negative impact of the peasants' actions.[72] Marie Chauvet had already shed light on the environmental tragedy. In her novels written in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in particular in *Fonds de Nègre* and *Amour*, she makes visible the complex ties of environmental issues to the colonial history of deforestation and the international business of exotic wood.[73] Lahens' novel follows in this direction, showing the repetitive attacks on the land are not only the fact of the peasants themselves, but also fueled by the economic appetites of the most powerful ones, whether they are rich Haitian landowners or foreign corporations, coupled with a colonial narrative that continues to prevail:

> "Anastase Mésidor s'était déjà approprié les meilleures terres du plateau. Mais il en lorgnait d'autres pour les vendre à prix d'or aux aventuriers et francs-tireurs venus d'ailleurs, comme ceux de la United West Indies Corporation, qui, avec l'arrivée des Marines, s'étaient abattus sur l'île. Persuadés qu'ils étaient que les grandes propriétés, comme les *fincas* de Saint-Domingue ou les *haciendas* de Cuba, feraient leur fortune et, du même coup, nous transformeraient enfin en paysans civilisés : chrétiens aux cheveux propres et peignés et portant chaussures. Apprivoisés mais sans terres. "[74]

> "Anastase Mesidor had already seized the best land of the plateau. But he also eyed others to sell for the price of gold to explorers and mavericks who came from afar, like those in the United West Indies Corporation, who had descended upon the island with the arrival of the Marines. Persuaded that they were like the *fincas* of Santo Domingo or the *haciendas* of Cuba, great properties that would make them rich and, at the same time, would transform us at last

[71] Herbeck, "Intertexts of the ecological," 87.
[72] On that topic, see in particular: Lucile Maertens and Adrienne Stork, "The Real Stories of Haiti's Forests. Changing the narrative around deforestation and charcoal in Haiti," *Books and Ideas,* Oct. 9, 2017, https://booksandideas.net/The-Real-Story-of-Haiti-s-Forests.html
[73] On Marie Chauvet's novels and the issue of deforestation, see Lizabeth Paravisine-Gebert, "All Misfortune comes from the Cut Trees: Marie Chauvet's Environmental Imagination," *Yale French Studies,* no.128 (2015): 74-91.
[74] Lahens, *Bain de lune,* 19.

> into civilized peasants: Christians, wearing shoes, hair clean and combed. Tamed but landless."[75]

The following passage emphasizes the intertwining factors creating a situation of extreme environmental vulnerability. The repetition of a the same independent clause introduced by the preposition "contre"/"against", as a litany, reinforces the sense of despair, confusion and disempowerment, like a spiral that seems endless. The wood clearing practices and the loss of respect for the land are part of a complex reality, that includes poverty and drought, and which forces the peasants to exploit more land, or to cut more trees to export. This leads to the erosion of soil, which combined with the effects of hurricanes and more dryness, increases poverty, and encourages the peasant to sell more land to survive. All these factors lead to a catastrophic situation.

> "Orvil était le *danti* de l'*habitation*, le patriarche, le maître spirituel des lieux. Son malaise et sa confusion furent les nôtres. Et il devint encore plus impuissant contre la terre et la rocaille qui encombraient le pied des versants à mesure que nous les défrichions. Contre la montée en puissance des ouragans. Contre la sécheresse chaque fois plus dévastatrice qui lui succédait. Contre le désamour de nos *jardins* à mesure qu'on nous abandonnait. Contre la grande scierie de Toufik Bekri qui accéléra l'abattage des arbres et détruisit les barrières naturelles. Contre la vente de nos terres qui rapetissaient, jusqu'à faire de nous des *chers maîtres* et *chères maîtresses* de peaux de chagrin. "[76]

> "Orvil was the *danti* of the *habitation*, the patriarch, the spiritual master of the place. His uneasiness and his confusion were ours. And he became even more powerless against the dirt and the rocks that blocked the paths on the slopes as we tried to clear them. Against the growing power of the hurricanes. Against the droughts, each more devastating than the one it followed. Against the breakdown of our *jardins* as they abandoned us. Against the big sawmill of Toufik Békri, who rushed to cut down the trees and destroy natural borders. Against the selling of our lands, which were shrinking to the point of making us *chers maîtres* and *chères maîtresses* of sorrow."[77]

---

[75] Yanick Lahens, *Moonbath*, trans. Emily Gogolak (Dallas: DeepVellum Publishing, 2017), 16.
[76] Lahens, *Bain de lune*, 151-2.
[77] Lahens, *Moonbath*, 113.

With the coming into power of "the prophet" (which refers to Aristide), the young boy Abner, the brother of the protagonist Cetoute, part of the last generation of the family, embraces the cult of "*Development*" attracted by a new narrative pertaining to the world of non-profit and international organizations that appears suspicious to the rest of the community:

> "Quand il fut assez grand, Abner voulut lui aussi nous attirer vers un monde qui n'existait pas. Un monde que lui avait fait miroiter de nouveaux vendeurs de miracles. Un monde dont il commençait à esquisser les contours dans sa tête. Abner n'a que le mot développement à la bouche. Développement par-ci. Développement par-là." [78]

> "When he was old enough, Abner also wanted to draw us toward a world that did not exist. A world that had been dangled before his eyes by the new sellers of miracles. A world whose contours he began to outline in his head. Abner only has the word development in his mouth. Development here. Development over there."[79]

His prescriptive program, although well intentioned and imbued with a desire to improve the well-being of the community and its environment (as are Manuel's ideals in *Gouverneurs de la rosée*), is doomed to failure as long as Abner tries to impose his narrative on the population:

> "Si vous coupez des arbres, pas de développement. Si vous plantez dans les terres de café des haricots, la terre va s'en aller et pas de développement. Si vous déféquez dans les rivières, pas de développement. Nous avons planté les haricots sur les terres de café tout là-haut, coupé les arbres et déféqué dans les eaux. Il a cru que l'arrivée du prophète, chef du parti des Démunis au pouvoir, changerait tout et nous avec ce tout-là."[80]

> "If you cut the trees, no development. If you plant the beans in the coffee fields, the land will disappear, no development. If you defecate in rivers, no development." We planted the beans in the coffee fields all the way up, cut down the trees and defecated in the waters. He believed that the arrive of the prophet, leader of the party of the Destitute, would change everything and us with it.[81]

[78] Lahens, *Bain de lune*, 237.
[79] Lahens, *Moonbath*, 173
[80] Lahens, *Bain de lune*, 237.
[81] Lahens, *Moonbath*, 173.

Caught up in a moralist and punitive logic that perpetuates a discourse of infantilizing the peasants and reducing the issues at stake to their individual behaviors, Abner faces the silent resistance or indifference of the community and faces the great disappointment of his political engagement. But from this failure, he gains inner strength, that is, the courage to move forward and start again. With the support of two other collaborators, "Jean-Paul", a descendant of the Mésidor" and " François", a nephew of Mrs. Fretillon, the two richest families of the area, they work as a go-between with the farmers' community in a more collaborative mode, trying to establish a dialogue and to learn from the community in order to plan a new irrigation system, which creates a space and hope for a better future.

A renewed vision of the community

In *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*, the peasants are in an antagonist position relative to the wealthy class of society in power. In *Bain de Lune* on the contrary, the peasants are linked to the rich family through a complex and ambiguous relationship, at a distance but still bound to a common destiny:

> "Un jeu qui nous liait tous aux Mésidor et qui les enchaînait à nous malgré eux. Un jeu dans lequel, vainqueurs et captifs, nous étions passes maîtres depuis longtemps. Très longtemps."[82]
>
> "A game that chained us all to the Mésidors and that shackled them to us despite themselves. A game that we, victors and captives, had mastered long ago. Very long ago.[83]

Despite the inequalities, the peasant families do not hesitate to stand together against any external attacks and defend the powerful Mesidor while mistrust and fear endure:

[82] Lahens, *Bain de lune*, 17-8.
[83] Lahens, *Moonbath*, 113.

> "Tout redoutables et cruels qu'ils fussent, les Mésidor étaient des nôtres. Nous en étions même fiers. Mais qu'on ne s'y méprene pas pour autant. Sous l'insulte partagée, sous la fierté fouettée sommeillaient la méfiance et la peur. Celle de toujours. (…) La méfiance et la peur, pour nous, d'une cruauté nouvelle, insoupçonnée des Mésidors, et, pour eux, celle d'une vengeance imprévisible de notre part. Qui sait?"[84]
>
> "As fearsome and cruel as they were, the Mésidors were ours. We were even proud of them. But make no mistake about it. Under the shared blow, under the whipped pride, mistrust and fear were sleeping. They were always there. (…) For us, mistrust and fear of a new and unexpected cruelty on the part of the Mésidors. And for the Mésidors, mistrust and fear of our unpredictable vengeance. Who knows?[85]"

Even the village priest, Père Baudin, who condemns the peasant's "pagan" practices is considered part of the community:

> "Pourtant il ne nous a jamais vraiment compris. Nous ne l'avons jamais vraiment compris non plus. Jamais. Mais était-ce le plus important ? Nous n'aurions jamais laissé quiconque toucher un seul de ses cheveux, et lui nous aurait défendu contre une armée entière." [86]
>
> "Father Bonin had come to love us just as we were. We had come to love his tough tenderness. Yet he didn't ever really understand us. We never really understood him either. Never. But was that the most important thing? We would never have let anyone touch a hair on his head, and he would have defended us against an entire army."[87]

This unstable "nous" as noted by the critics, reveals a more fluid way to envision the community, more ambiguous, both aware of its own status on the margins of the world and of its fragility, but also members of the larger community, ready and forced to adapt. The "nous" is also embodied and destabilized by the "je" of Cétoute the narrator who, in this way, stands outside the collective but at the same time identifies herself within her family lineage. Lying between life and death on the shores of the beach at the beginning of the novel, Cétoute tells the story of her family in a narration

[84] Lahens, *Bain de lune*, 37.
[85] Lahens, *Moonbath*, 30.
[86] Lahens, *Bain de lune*, 135.
[87] Lahens, *Moonbath*, 101.

that intertwines her own (in italic using the first person singular in the text) with that of her family (using the first-person plural and the third person singular).

Cétoute's death echoes that of her great-grandfather Bonal Lafleur, in the 1920s when he decided to sell the best part of his land (against the wishes of his ancestors) and was then mysteriously murdered and dispossessed of the money from the sale. The family does not resort to legal justice. Nevertheless, possessing spiritual strength, Dieula (Bonal's wife) is able to find the dead body of her husband after a dream and wanders for a month in mourning and penance. Four days after her return, the fourth son of the powerful Mesidor family dies unexpectedly of a mysterious disease, a death that is interpreted by the community as the consequences of the magical powers of Dieula: a backlash or a sense of divine justice. The novel does not cast Vodou and spiritual elements as debilitating or encouraging a submissive attitude but as part as a system of belief, a strength, and a protection.

In *Gouverneur de la rosée*, however, while celebrating the traditions and customs of the Haitian people, the revolutionary narrative does not question the colonial/civilizing viewpoint imposed on a people that appear to be caught up in a world of orality, paganism and sorcery –a "primitive" stage doomed to be overcome. Manuel sees the religious practices of the villagers as entertaining fatalist attitudes when the situation calls for a concrete action, as the community is facing starvation:

> "La récolte a péri, il n'y a plus d'espoir. (…) Et qu'est-ce que vous avez fait contre ? Une seule chose : crier votre misère aux loas, offrir des cérémonies pour qu'ils fassent tomber la pluie. Mais tout ça, c'est des bêtises et des macquaqueries. Ça ne compte pas, c'est inutile et c'est un gaspillage. (…) j'ai de la considération pour les coutumes des anciens, mais le sang d'un coq ou d'un cabri ne peut faire virer les saisons, changer la course des nuages et les gonfler d'eau comme des vessies. "[88]

[88] Roumain, *Gouverneurs de la Rosée,* 84.

> "The harvest has perished. There's no more hope. (…) And what have you done to prevent it? One thing only. Cried about your misfortune to the *loas,* offered ceremonies so that they'd make the rain fall. But all that's just so much silly monkeyshines. That doesn't count! It's useless, and it's wasting time. (…) I respect the customs of the old folks, but the blood of a rooster or a young goat can't make the seasons change, or alter the course of the clouds and fill them with water like bladders."[89]

Condé, in her essay "Order, Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer" has pointed out the traditional and caricatural depiction of love and the role of women in Roumain's novel.[90] Far from an idyllic love story between Manuel and Anaïsse, *Bain de Lune* provides a more complex and realist picture of gender relations. The relationship between Tertulien and Olmène is merely about an "arranged union" or a "strange" transaction. It is not a caricatural portrayal of a woman's submission, yet also does not fit a narrow "Western" feminist view of women's independence (this might explain why the female characters may not have been understood by a French or Haitian urban audience). The territorial appetites of the rich landowner, Tertulien, accompany the violent sexual appropriation of women's bodies, an authorized and legitimate "land grab mentality"[91] since the early years of colonization. Cetoute's grandmother, Olmène, is aware of that reality, but prefers to play the game of seduction, with some complicated feelings of attraction, avoiding rape in her first sexual relation and gaining some material security: " Tertulien mentionna des chaussures, trois robes, une case, un lit à baldaquin, un lopin de terre et une vache. Elle ne dit rien mais l'un et l'autre savait qu'un marché venait d'être conclu. (…) joua un jeu convenu."[92] [Tertulien mentioned shoes, three dresses, a house, a canopy bed, a

[89] Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, 87.
[90] Maryse Condé, "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer," *Yale French Studies,* no.83 (1993): 125-6.
[91] Herbeck, "Intertexts of the ecological," 92.
[92] Lahens, *Bain de lune,* 70.

plot of land and a cow.[93]] The same transaction will also be concluded with the father.[94] Tertulien brings to Olmène material security. However, the idyll is brief. The rumors and gossip called up visions of sorcery ("On prétendait que Tertulien Mésidor tenait son pouvoir et son argent d'un pacte avec le diable."[95] ["It was said that Tertulien Mésidor got his power and his money from a pact with the devil."[96]]). The community's analysis of the situation using a vocabulary that reflects superstitions is in fact not so far from reality. When Tertulien has to prove his allegiance to the new political power in place, he does not hesitate to have a prisoner killed and buried next to Olmène's house, a murder that she witnesses with her baby in awe. To prevent her from speaking, Tertulien, caught up in the circle of violence, intimidates and rapes her, prompting her decision to leave. But her departure does not appear to her as tragic but presents a promising opportunity: "Laisser son passé derrière elle était une experience qu'Olmène vivait comme un Cadeau. Comme un don."[97] ["Leaving the past behind her was an experience that Olmène lived like it was a gift."[98]]

The Lafleur family experiences the succeeding tumultuous political events of the second half of the 20th century in Haitian history. Even being far away from the capital, life in the rural areas undergoes change. However, whatever the political ideology, the power dynamics in the area and the structural socio-economic inequalities remain unchanged, while the degradation of the land intensifies. The

[93] Lahens, *Moonbath,* 54.
[94] Lahens, *Bain de lune,* 96.
[95] Lahens, *Bain de lune,* 35.
[96] Lahens, *Moonbath,* 28.
[97] Lahens, *Bain de lune,* 128.
[98] Lahens, *Moonbath,* 97.

reaction of the countryside population to the succeeding oppressive regimes is not straightforward, neither passive adherence nor a complete resistance, but mixed reactions of resignation, fear, silence, necessity of survival and desire to make a better living. Each of the children of the Lafleur family will take a different trajectory: Léosthène and Olmène take the path of exile, in search of a better living and money to send to their family : one in the US ; the other in the Dominican Republic; and Fenelon becomes a "man in blue" part of the militia of Duvalier (known as "the man with a black hat and thick glasses"), and provides some economic benefit and security to the family. He eventually dies in the events of retaliation known as "*dechoukag*" at the end of the regime.

A renewed understanding of a messianic future

When Cétoute feels attracted to Jimmy, history seems to repeat itself in a cyclical movement but with more intensity. Like what happened to her grandmother with Tertulien, she is fascinated by "Jimmy" the young rich man and member of the wealthy Mesidor family whose English name and urban upbringing exert a fatal attraction. Jimmy comes back to the family's land to receive the last words of his grandfather, his rapacity for gold and power, like a benediction. Honoring his promise, Jimmy perpetuates the legacy of crime and greedy attitudes, adding drug trafficking to the long list of mafia practices. Cétoute's death, contrary to Manuel's in *Gouverneur de la rosée*, is not a sacrifice for the community but the result of a cold-blooded murder by a rapist and drug dealer, whose grandfather happened to be also her own, the result of the relentless spiral of violence. Lahens' novel departs from an ending

that represents a messianic male character whose death and future son will ensure the redemption and a reconciled life in the community. Nevertheless, the novel does not end on a tragic note and does not renounce a messianic opening to the future. This opening is not based on material heroic actions of a character but on the spiritual faith of Vodou and the loving connection of the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible world.

Despite the tragedy, the novel retains a certain faith in political leadership and a collective "we" through the character of Abner. His ability to open up a way for a future-to-come does not reside in a particular political discourse but in his capacity to remain in movement, to not be frozen by the tragic death of his sister, but to keep faith even with very thin prospects: "Il ne renonçait pas…Il avançait. Il en tituba presque."[99] Previously, after his first disappointment when he had tried to promote change and "*development*" in the community, he had found the courage to continue and pursue his project. The death of his sister, another challenge, encouraged him to call for a police investigation. And after taking this initiative (unprecedented in the village), he found in himself courage to move. Abner symbolizes the refusal of despair and inspires the group to continue to fight for life with faith and optimism. Equipped with his strongest arm, "an invisible machete" he opens up a way for the collective:

> " Nous avons suivi Abner, tellement à son aise dans les *bayahondes* qui brouillaient la route devant nous. La route de demain. Ces halliers où nous ne voyions s'ouvrir aucune issue. Contrairement à nous, Abner, d'une machette invisible, semblait arrachait les broussailles et avançait. Nous avons réglé notre pas sur le sien."[100]
>
> "Then, we followed Abner, so at ease in the *bayahondes* that blurred the path ahead. The way to tomorrow. These thickets where we could see no way out. Unlike us, Abner, with an

[99] Lahens, *Bain de lune,* 260.
[100] Lahens, *Bain de lune,* 260.

> invisible machete, seemed to be tearing out bushes and going on. We measure our steps by his."[101]

The machete, a symbol of resistance against injustice links Roumain's text ["This land is the Black man's. Each time they've tried to take it from us, we have cleaned out injustice with the blades of our **machetes**." [102] [my emphasis]) to Lahens' novel representing the extraordinary strength of the Haitian people. In the legacy of this extraordinary history, one sees Abner followed by the community as the "soldier of truth" that Alain Badiou has described,[103] someone who is able to show "his human capacities beyond risk, beyond death" someone who performs a true heroic act in the sense that it is more than accomplishing, it is creating something new, something that exceeds the possibilities of what can be done, "an act of the infinite." All courage, according to Badiou "returns to passing there where before it hadn't been foreseeable that anyone could find a passage."[104] Abner is not defining the "way to tomorrow" but by showing courage, by continuing to move forward (and taking the risk to fail or to be wrong), he creates the imaginary means that allows a way out of the great suffering. His courage can also be seen as the "miraculous vision," the secret forces and wisdom of Télumée Miracle in Schwarz-Bart's or Man Ya in Pineau: the miracle, not as a spectacular heroic action but a transformative or "prophetic vision of the past" to allow one to keep faith in the future.

---

[101] Lahens, *Moonbath*, 190.
[102] Jacques Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, trans. Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook (Portsmouth: Heinemann, Caribbean Writers Series, 1978), 74.
[103] Alain Badiou, "The contemporary figure of the soldier in politics and poetry," Conference at UCLA, January 2007, https://www.lacan.com/badsold.htm.
[104] Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Ineasthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005): 106. See also: Adrian Johnston, "Courage Before The Event: The Force of Affects," *Filozofski vestnik* XXIX, no. 2 (2008) : 110, https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/filozofski-vestnik/article/view/3192/2908.

Lahens' narrative, however, does not end with Abner. The novel ends with Cétoute traveling to Guinea, following the Vodou tradition. And if the courage of Abner seems to come from a mysterious source, I can see a subtle connection (through lexicon) between his "invisible machete," the "Invisibles" and Cétoute, whose death is not the end but the beginning of a new life expressed in the future tense: "Ma mort ne sera plus un tourment. Je panserai des plaies. J'adoucirai l'amertume. J'intercéderai auprès des lwas, des Invisibles."[105] [My death will no longer be a torment. I will bandage the wounds. I will sweeten the bitterness. I will intercede with the lwas, the Invisibles."[106]] The dead are not dead since they continue to live with the living ones and sweeten the bitterness, a sweetness essential to courage. And the living ones will continue to keep the courage to live and envision a future-to-be drawing their force from the memory of the dead. Past and future come to meet in the present.

Lahens' novel provides no ready-made solutions nor normative response in the end but invites the reader to rethink the racial and social prejudices inherited from the colonial world and the structural injustices that endure. By shifting our view to value the silent perspective of those who have been silenced, her writing aims to put an end to the Western colonial category of civilizational discourse that the Indigenist movement and the novel *Gouverneur de la Rosée* did not challenge enough.

Decolonial thinking and the question of universalism

[105] Lahens, *Bain de lune,* 261.
[106] Lahens, *Moonbath,* 190.

In the conclusion of his article, Herbeck acknowledges, "Bain de lune can be appreciated for its universal message with respect to communities and their immediate environment" but he insists at the end of his analysis on the "Haitian" aspect of the novel:

> "While Bain de lune can therefore be interpreted as subscribing to a global "ecological citizenship" that, as developed by Deane Curtin, "requires commitments to human, as well as wider ecological justice," I propose that Lahens' novel remains first and foremost a text of and about Haiti and, in particular—as suggested by the peritextual blurb with which this paper begins—the Haitian landscape." [107]

Herbeck supports his position by quoting another critic of the novel, Sapp who noted that in her essay *Failles* Yanick Lahens focuses on "Haïti's role in the larger world" while *Bain de Lune* appears as a "shift away" from *Failles*[108] "to examine the importance of history for individual Haitians."[109] This commentary, which appears rather neutral in positioning the novel within Lahens' oeuvre, tends to reinstate the binaries or oppositions that the case of Haiti precisely shatters (Haiti/the World; local vs global; individual/collective; History/history; Haitian landscape/the rest of the world landscape). The commentary bears the risk of essentializing Haiti as radically different, always in exile from the rest of the world. To view *Bain de Lune* through this lens of an essentialized national perspective limits our understanding to these fictitious borders. What history teaches us, is that after its independence, Haiti had to continue to deal with colonial economic structures and its mental and ideological representations outside and within its borders, and later within the radical discourse of

[107] Herbeck, "Intertexts of the ecological," 100.
[108] Yanick Lahens, *Failles* (Paris: Sabine Wespieseur Editeur, 2010).
[109] Robert Sapp, "The Talking Dead: Narrating the Past in Yanick Lahens's "Bain de Lune,"" *Journal of Haitian Studies* 23, no. 1 (spring 2017): 121.

the indigenist movement. And the intimate perspective that Lahens uses in *Bain de Lune* proves to be enlightening at those different levels, showing how individual lives face in multiple ways the consequences of the political decisions taken at the national and international level. Deforestation is a good example that Lahens (and before her, Marie Chauvet) uses to illustrate as a complex issue that has ramifications brought about not only by the individual actions of the peasants, but also resulting from the colonial and postcolonial economic order. Without formulating any solutions, Lahens forces us to seriously think along with those who are excluded and to learn from their experience. Those questions are already present in *Failles*, when she explains at length,

> "Haïti n'est pas une périphérie. Son histoire fait d'elle un centre. Je l'ai toujours vécu comme tel. Comme une métaphore de tous les défis auxquels l'humanité doit faire face aujourd'hui à la faveur de cette catastrophe à poser les questions essentielles des rapports Nord-Sud, celles aussi fondamentales des rapports Sud-Sud, et à ne pas esquiver les questions et les urgences de fond."
>
> "Haiti is not a periphery. Because of its history, the country holds, on the contrary, a central position. I always experienced it that way. As a metaphor for all the challenges humanity faces today. This catastrophe forces us to consider the main issues regarding North-South relations, and as importantly, South-South relations, and to avoid eluding the in-depth questions and urgency. "[110]

Lahens makes the connection between the internal situation of Haiti and the global dynamics at stake; what is happening in Haiti is also happening at the global level and within; the "faults" of Haiti are also the "faults" of the global world. And this is precisely why it is important to keep using the term "universal" rather than casting it aside. It is as if, called to order because of its difference, its origin, Lahens' novel could not legitimately speak for humanity, as if it was almost impossible to fully

[110] Yanick Lahens, *Failles*, 70.

concede universality to Haiti and Haitian literature. I think this claim is rooted in the long-standing tradition of colonial relegation of the "other" to his/her otherness, and its legacy today that we can find, for example, in the difference between Francophone Literature (characterized by its difference) and French Literature (distinguished by the mark of its universality). I understand Lahens' claim of a "universal" aspect of the novel not as raising Haiti's particular situation to represent universally all other particular situations around the world, but, rather, as inviting us to a critical border thinking (or dwelling in the border). Rather than a universal abstract situation that would impose itself horizontally, the story draws from the relative marginality of subaltern people, an experience that is common to a world that has not only created physical, but also economic, social, racial, and gendered borders between people. By recognizing this "universal" transversal commonality, Lahens invites the reader to deconstruct the imaginary walls and to break free from the silent alienations that separate people in the Haitian community and in our human community.

To conclude, I would like to reflect on Lahens' prominent position in the literary field in relation to other female Caribbean writers of French-speaking literature. Like Simone Schwarz-Bart, Condé or Pineau, she comes from a middle-class family, was educated in the French school system, studied in Paris. She became a writer later in a second career albeit hesitantly. Like her predecessor Marie Vieux Chauvet and like her Guadeloupean peers, she nevertheless complicates the position of the "engaged writer." Her literary work engages with the socio-political realities of Haiti from a first-person perspective, while refusing to purport any political agenda.

Independent of any political or feminist militancy, Lahens, along with the other Caribbean female authors, supports literature and public engagement as an "art of representation."[111] Literature engages and questions the political from a distant and ever-changing perspective. It is an aesthetic and an ethic that thrive from the dynamic of its own movement (the shift of perspectives, the movement of thoughts, the movement of meanings), from a non-violent and relational/love space. Thinking from an intimist, feminine, rural, outsider viewpoint, Lahens invites us to see the epistemological value of "border thinking" or "thinking beyond borders." While acknowledging the exceptional legacy of Haitian literature, she thus contributes to a renewal of its decolonial approach.

[111] Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 13.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adotevi, Stanislas. *Négritudes et négrologues.* Paris: Editions 10/18, 1972.

Angulo, A.J. "Education during the American Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934." *Historical Studies in Education/ Revue d'Histoire de l'Education* 22, no.2 (Fall 2010): 1-17. https://doi.org/10.32316/hse/rhe.v22i2.2357.

Arnold, A. James. "The Erotics of Colonialism in Contemporary French West Indian Literary Culture." *New West Indian Guide* 68, no. 1&2 (1994): 5-22.

Azodo, Uzoamaka Ada, ed. *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ.* Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003.

Barthelemy, Gérard. *Le pays en dehors. Essai sur l'univers rural haïtien.* Port-au Prince: Henry Deschamps, 1989.

Barthelemy, Gérard. "Le rôle des Bossales dans l'émergence d'une culture de marronage en Haïti." *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* 37, no. 148 (1997): 839-862. https://www.persee.fr/doc/cea_0008-0055_1997_num_37_148_1835.

Barthelemy, Gérard. *Créoles-Bossales. Conflits en Haïti.* Petit-Bourg: Ibis Rouge, 2000.

Barthelemy, Gérard. "Haïti ou l'affrontement de deux créolités." *Africultures,* February 29, 2004. http://africultures.com/haiti-ou-laffrontement-de-deux-creolites 3293/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=500.

Badiou, Alain. *Handbook of Inaesthetics.* Translated by Alberto Toscano. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Barthes, Roland. *The Rustle of Language.* Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986.

Bebel-Gisler, Dany, and Laënnec Hurbon, *Culture et Pouvoir dans la Caraïbe. Langue créole, vaudou, sectes religieuses en Guadeloupe et en Haïti.* Paris*:* L'Harmattan, 1976.

Bernabé, Jean. "Contribution à l'étude de la diglossie littéraire: le cas de Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle de Simone Schwarz-Bart." *Textes Etudes et Documents* 2 (1979), 103-130.

Bernabé, Jean, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant. *Éloge de la créolité*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989.

Boisseron, Bénédicte. "Intimité: entretien avec Maryse Condé." *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 13, no.1 (2010): 131-153.

Boisvert, Jayne. "Colonial Hell and Female Slave Resistance in Saint Domingue." *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7, no.1 (Spring 2001): 61-76.

Boittin, Jennifer Anne. "In Black and White: Gender, Race Relations and the Nardal Sisters in Interwar Paris." *French Colonial History* 6 (2005): 123-127.

Bongie, Chris. *Friends and enemies, the Scribal politics of Post/Colonial Literature.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008.

Bonnefoi, Stephane, and Diphy Mariani. "Les Antilles françaises enchaînées à l'esclavage; Episode 3 : Un passé qui ne passe pas." *LSD La série documentaire*, France Culture, May 8, 2019. Audio, 55 :26. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/lsd-la-serie-documentaire/les-antilles-francaises-enchainees-a-lesclavage-34-un-passe-qui-ne-passe-pas.

Boschetti, Anna. *Sartre et "Les Temps modernes": une entreprise intellectuelle.* Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1985.

Boschetti, Anna. "How Literary Field Can Contribute to Knowledge of World Literary Space." *Paragraph* 1 (Mar. 2012): 10-29.

Bouchereau, Madeleine. *Haïti et ses femmes, une étude d'évolution culturelle.* Port-au Prince: Presses libres, 1957.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Le sens pratique.* Paris: Minuit, 1980.

Bourdieu, Pierre. "L'illusion biographique." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 62, no.1 (June 1986): 69-72.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Les règles de l'art; Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essay on Art and Literature.* Translated by Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Raisons Pratiques: Sur la Théorie de l'action.* Paris: Seuil, 1994.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Méditations pascaliennes.* Paris: Le Seuil, 1997.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*. Paris: Raisons d'agir, 2004.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Les héritiers. Les étudiants et la culture.* Paris: Le sens commun, 1964.

Bourdier, Karen. "Les conditions sanitaires sur les habitations sucrières de Saint Domingue à la fin du siècle." *Dix-huitième siècle,* 1, no. 43 (2011): 349-368.

Boyce Davies, Carole, and Elaine Savory Fido, ed. *Out of the Kumbla. Caribbean Women and Literature.* Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990.

Brière, Jean-François. "La Révolution haïtienne dans les manuels scolaires français, 1857-2011." *Journal of Haitian Studies* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 32-56.

Britton, Celia. "Globalization and Political Action in the Work of Edouard Glissant." *Small Axe* 30 (November 2009): 1-11.

Brutus, Edner. *Instruction publique en Haïti, 1492-1945*. Port-au-Pince: Imprimerie de l'État, 1948.

Buber, Martin. *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism.* Translated by Maurice Friedman. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988.

Burnauski, Sarah. *Les frontières racialisées de la littérature française; Contrôle au faciès et stratégies de passage.* Paris : Honoré Champion, 2017.

Burton, Richard. "*Vichysme et Vichystes à la Martinique," Les Cahiers du CERAG* 34 (Feb.1978): 1-101.

Buxbaum, Yitzhak. *Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism*. Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1994.

Campbell, Carl. "Education and Society in Haiti 1804–1843." *Caribbean Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2004): 14-24.

Casanova, Pascale. *La République mondiale des lettres.* Paris : Seuil, 1999.

Castera, Georges. "L'indigénisme haïtien, un point de vue contradictoire." *Notre Librairie* 32 (Oct.-Dec. 1997): 76-89.

Centre d'action culturelle. *Paroles de Terre en Larmes: Nouvelles.* Paris: Hatier, 1988.

Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.

Césaire, Aimé. *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1939.

Césaire, Aimé. *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land.* Translated and edited by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

Césaire, Suzanne. *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941-1945).* Edited by Daniel Maximin. Translated by Keith L. Walker. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no.1 (2000): 9-32.

Chamoiseau, Patrick et Raphael Confiant. *Lettres creoles.* Paris: Gallimard, 1999.

Chancy, Myriam J.A. *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." *Feminist Studies* 14, no.1 (Spring 1988): 67-79.

Clark, Vévé. "Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île; une interview de Maryse Condé." *Callaloo,* 12, no.1 (Winter 1989): 85-133.

Clément, Job B. "History of Education in Haiti: 1804-1915 (First Part)." *Revista de Historia de América* 87 (Jan.-June 1979): 141-181.

Clément, Job B. "History of Education in Haiti: 1804-1915." *Revista de Historia de América* 88 (July-Dec. 1979): 33-74.

Clergé, Natacha. "Pour en finir avec une historiographie héroïsante: critique de l'historiographie féministe traditionnelle." In *Déjouer le silence. Contre-discours sur les femmes haïtiennes,* edited by Sabine Lamour, Denyse Côté and Darline Alexis, 224-235. Montréal: Les Editions du remue-ménage/Mémoire d'encrier, 2018.

Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Ecrire en pays dominé.* Paris: Gallimard, 1996.

Chevrier, Jacques. *Poétiques d'Edouard Glissant.* Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris Sorbonne, 2000.

Cohen-Brisac, Anne-Céline. *Des livres de poches pour un public intellectuel :*

Evolution de la collection 10/18. MaD diss., Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Bibliothécaire, 1980. https://www.enssib.fr/bibliotheque-numerique/documents/63013-livres-de-proche-pour-un-public-intellectuel-evolution-de-la-collection-1018-des.pdf.

Collins, Holly. "*La querelle de la créolisation,* Créolization vs Créolité in Glissant, Condé and the Creolists." *Nottingham French Studies* 56, no.1 (2017): 67-81.

Collins Hill, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* London: Routledge, 1990.

Condé, Maryse. "Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle." *Présence africaine* 83 (1972): 138-139.

Condé, Maryse. *La parole des femmes. Essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 1979.

Condé, Maryse. *Une saison à Rihata.* Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981.

Condé, Maryse. *Ségou: Les murailles de terre.* Paris: Robert Laffont, 1984.

Condé, Maryse. *Ségou: La terre en miettes.* Paris: Robert Laffont, 1985.

Condé, Maryse. *Moi Tituba Socière Noire de Salem.* Paris: Mercure de France, 1986.

Condé, Maryse. *Heremakhonon. En attendant le bonheur.* Paris: Seghers, 1988.

Condé, Maryse. *I, Tituba Black witch of Salem.* Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Caraf Book, 1992.

Condé, Maryse. "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer." *Yale French Studies,* no.83 (1993): 121-35.

Condé, Maryse. *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer : contes vrais de mon enfance.* Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999.

Condé, Maryse. *Tales from the Heart. True Stories from My Childhood.* Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Soho Press Inc., 2001.

Condé, Maryse. *Victoire des saveurs et des mots.* Paris: Mercure, 2006.

Condé, Maryse. *Victoire, My Mother's Mother*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Atria Book, 2010.

Condé, Maryse. *La vie sans fard.* Paris: JC Lattès, 2012.

Condé, Maryse. *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Salt Lake City: Seagull Books, 2014.

Condé, Maryse. *Mets et Merveilles.* Paris : JC Lattès, 2015.

Condé, Maryse. *What is Africa to me? Fragments of a True-to-Life Autobiography*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Salt Lake City: Seagull Books, 2017.

Condé, Maryse, and Madeleine Cottenet-Hage, ed. *Penser la créolité*. Paris: Khartala, 1995.

Cottias, Myriam. " 'Forgetting the past' for 'citizenship': Barter and resentment in Martinique (1848-1946)." Translated by Lysa Hochroth. *New Contrée* 42 (1997): 155-168.

Cottias, Myriam. "Esclavage, assimilation et dépendance. Essai sur une relation coloniale." *Cahier du Centre de recherche historique* 40 (2007): 143-161. https://journals.openedition.org/ccrh/3394#tocto1n3.

Cottias, Myriam, and Madeleine Dobbie. *Relire Mayotte Capécia. Une femme des Antilles dans l'espace colonial français.* Paris: Armand Colin, 2012.

Cottias, Myriam and Madeleine Dobbie, "Joséphine Baker et Mayotte Capécia: race et genre dans deux biographies transcoloniales." In *Le postcolonial comparé, anglophonie, francophonie,* edited by Claire Joubert, 243-262. Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2014.

Coursil, Jacques. "Categories in Edouard Glissant's writings (2nd version)." Accessed Apr. 2, 2021. http://www.coursil.com/bilder/3_language/Literature/Edouard%20Glissant%27s%20categories.pdf.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-167.

Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981.

Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena, and Other essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs.*Translated by David Allison. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

Dracius, Suzanne. *L'autre qui danse.* Paris: Seghers, 1989.

Ducournau, Claire. *La fabrique des classiques africains.* Paris : CNRS Editions, 2017.

Dumont, Jacques. "Conscription antillaise et citoyenneté revendiquée au tournant de la première guerre mondiale." *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 92, no. 4 (2006): 101-116.

Dumont, Jacques. "La figure de l'ennemi. Les Antilles et la Première Guerre mondiale." *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de Guadeloupe* 168 (May-Aug. 2014): 135-151.

Dussel, Enrique. *1492: El encubrimiento del otro. Hacia el origen del "Mito de la Modernidad*, La Paz-Bolivia: Plural Editores. (1994).

Edwards, Brent Hayes. *The Practice of Diaspora. Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Eisenberg, Josy. *Dieu et les Juifs*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2009.

Eribon, Didier. *Retour à Reims.* Paris: Fayard, 2009.

Eribon, Didier. *Returning to Reims.* Translated by Michael Lucey. Los Angeles: Semiotext/ Foreign Agents, 2013.

Fanon, Frantz. *Peau noire, masques blancs.* Paris: Seuil, 1952.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Mask*s. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 1986.

Ferly, Odile. "Writing Cultural and Gender difference: Sylviane Telchid's *Throvia de la Dominique.*" *Cardiff University New Readings* 7 (2004): 1-23.

Fogarty, Richard. *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914–1918.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

Fonkua, Romuald, Pierre Halen and Katharina Stadtler, eds., *Les champs littéraires africains*. Paris: Karthala, 2001.

Fratta, Carla. "Entrevue avec Maryse Condé." *Caribana* 1 (1990): 85-92.

Gautier, Arlette. "Sous l'esclavage, le patriarcat." *Nouvelles questions feministes* 9/10 (Spring 1985): 9-33.

Gautier, Arlette. *Les sœurs de Solitude : Femmes et esclavage aux Antilles du XVIIe au XIXe siècle.* Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010.

Georges, Legros Danielle. “Ida Salomon Faubert.” In *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Franklin W. Knight. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2016.

Ghinelli, Paola. *Archipels littéraires. Chamoiseau, Condé, Confiant, Brival, Maximin, Laferrière, Pineau, Dalembert, Agnant*. Montréal: Mémoire d’encrier, 2005.

Giraud, Michel. *Races et classes à la Martinique: les relations sociales entre enfants de différentes couleurs à l’école.* Paris: Anthropos, 1979.

Glissant, Edouard. *Le discours antillais.* Paris: Gallimard, 1981.

Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation.* Translated by Betsy Wings. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse, Selected essays.* Translated by Michael Dash. University of Virginia Press: 1999.

Glissant, Edouard. *Poetic Intention*. Translated by Natalie Stephens and Anne Malena. Calicoon, NY: Night Boat Books, 2010.

Glover, Kaima L. *Haiti Unbound: a Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011.

Glover, Kaima L. “ ‘Black’ Radicalism in Haiti and the Disorderly Feminine: the Case of Marie Vieux Chauvet.” *Small Axe* 40 (Mar. 2013): 7-21.

Glover, Kaiama, and Allessandra Benedicty-Kokken, eds., “Revisiting Marie Vieux Chauvet: Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Feminine.” *Yale French Studies* 128 (2016).

Goldmann, Lucien. *Pour une sociologie du roman.* Paris: Gallimard, 1964.

Green, Marie-Jean. “Simone Schwarz-Bart et la tradition feminine aux Antilles.” *Présence francophone* 36 (1990): 130-133.

Grosfoguel, Ramon. “La descolonización de la economía-política y los estudios poscoloniales : transmodernidad, pensamiento fronterizo y colonialidad global.” *Tabula Rasa*, nº 4 (2006): 17-48. https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39600402.

Gyssels, Kathleen. *Le folklore et la littérature créole dans l’oeuvre de Simone Schwarz-Bart.* Bruxelles: Académie des Sciences d’Outre-mer, 1995.

Gyssels, Kathleen. *Filles de Solitudes. Essai sur l’identité antillaise dans les (auto-*

biographies fictives de Simone et André Schwarz-Bart. Paris: L'harmattan, 1996.

Gyssels, Kathleen. *Marrannes et Marronnes: la co-écriture reversible d'André et Simone Schwarz-Bart.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2015.

Gyssels, Kathleen. "Portrait of an Authentic Schnorrer: Abrasza Zemsz in Richard Marientras's Memory." *Journal of Jewish Identities* 12, no. 2 (July 2019): 197-209.

Hage, Julien. "Les littératures francophones d'Afrique noire à la conquête de l'édition française (1914-1974)." *Gradhiva* 10 (2009): 80-105. https://journals.openedition.org/gradhiva/1523.

Haig, Samantha. *Mapping A Tradition: Francophone Women's Writing from Guadeloupe.* Leeds: Maney for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2000.

Hall, Stuart. *The Fateful Triangle, Race, ethnicity.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Hallward, Peter. *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific.*Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.

Hardwick, Louise. "J'ai toujours été une personne un peu à part': questions à Maryse Condé." *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 9, no.1 (2006): 111-124.

Heinich, Nathalie. *Etre écrivain. Création et identitée.* Paris: La découverte, 2000.

Herbeck, Jason. "Intertexts of the ecological." *Journal of Haitian Studies* 23, no. 2 (fall 2017): 81-106.

Hillberg, Raul. *The destruction of the European Jews.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

Horvilleur, Delphine. *Comment les rabbins font les enfants. Sexe, transmission, identitée dans leJudaïsme.* Paris: Grasset, 2015.

Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic, Marketing the Margins.* London: Routledge, 2001.

Hurbon, Laënnec. *Culture et dictature en Haïti. L'imaginaire sous contrôle*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1979.

Hurbon, Laënnec. *Le barbare imaginaire.* Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1988.

Jacquet, Chantal. *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014.

Jennings, Eric T. "La dissidence aux Antilles (1940-1943)." *Vingtième siècle, revue d'histoire* 68 (Oct.-Dec. 2000): 55-71.

Johnston, Adrian. "Courage Before The Event: The Force of Affects." *Filozofski vestnik* XXIX, no. 2 (2008): 101-133. https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/filozofski-vestnik/article/view/3192/2908.

Joint, Louis-Auguste. "Système éducatif et inégalités sociales en Haïti. Le cas des écoles catholiques." *Recherche et ressources en éducation et formation* 2 (2008): 18-24.

Joint, Louis-Auguste. "L'école dans la construction de l'État." In *Genèse de l'État haïtien (1804-1859),* edited by Michel Hector and Laënnec Hurbon, 225-41. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2009.

Jonassaint, Jean. "De la complexité caribéenne, notes sur une impasse théorique." *Francophonia* 49 (Fall 2005): 37-58.

Kaufmann, Francine. *Pour relire le dernier des Justes. Reflexions sur la Shoah.* Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1987.

Kaufmann, Francine. "André Schwarz-Bart, la lumière d'une étoile morte." *Les Temps Modernes,* 641 (2006/7): 64-73.

Kaufmann, Francine. "André Schwarz-Bart, le juif de nulle part." *L'arche* 583 (Dec. 2006): 84-89.

Kaufmann, Francine. "L'oeuvre juive et l'oeuvre noire d'André Schwarz-Bart." *Pardes* 44, no.1 (2008): 135-148.

Kaufmann, Francine. "Le projet judéo-noir d'André Schwarz-Bart: saga reversible." *Présence francophone. Revue International de langue et de littérature* 79, no.1 (2012): 15-38. https://crossworks.holycross.edu/pf/vol79/iss1/6/.

Kaufmann, Francine. "La non-vocation d'André Schwarz-Bart. "Le fusil a fait pousser un cri d'homme à l'éléphant", ou l'écriture en réponse à l'évènement." *Continents Manuscrits Génétique des textes littéraires* 10 (2018): 1-18. https://journals.openedition.org/coma/1173.

Kaussen, Valerie. "Slaves, *Viejos* and the *Internationale*: Modernity and Global

Contact in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée.*" *Research in African Literatures* 35, no. 4
(Winter 2004): 121-41.

Konaré, Kadiatou, and Pierre Astier. "Entretien avec Pierre Astier, directeur du Serpent à Plumes. Propos recueillis par Kadiatou Konaré." *Notre Librairie* 9 (1998): 30-34.

Kuhn Kennedy, Fleur. *Le disciple et le faussaire. Imitation et subversion Romanesque de la mémoire juive.* Paris: Garnier, 2016.

Labelle, Micheline. *Idéologie de couleurs et classes sociales en Haïti.* Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987.

Labrune-Badiane, Céline. "Voyages vers un 'continent imaginaire': Antillais au Sénégal (1960-1970)." *Outre-mer* (2013): 137-150. https://hal.univ-antilles.fr/hal-00974141/document.

Lahens, Yanick. *L'exil entre l'ancrage et la fuite, l'écrivain haïtien.* Port-au-Prince: Editions Deschamps), 1990.

Lahens, Yanick. "Exile between Writing and Place." Translated by Cheryl Thomas and Paulette Richards, *Callaloo* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 135-46.

Lahens, Yanick. "Haitian Literature after Duvalier: an Interview with Yanick Lahens." Interview by Clarisse Zimra, *Callaloo* 16, no.1 (Winter 1993): 77-93.

Lahens, Yanick. "L'apport de quatre romancières au roman moderne haïtien," *Journal of Haitian Studies,* 3/4 (1997-1998): 87-95.

Lahens, Yanick. *La Petite Corruption (huit nouvelles).* Port-au-Prince: Editions Mémoires, 1999.

Lahens, Yanick. "5 questions pour île en île." Interview by Thomas Spears, January 15, 2009. Audio, 26:00.
http://ile-en-ile.org/yanick-lahens-5-questions-pour-ile-en-ile/.

Lahens, Yanick. *Failles.* Paris: Sabine Wespieseur Editeur, 2010.

Lahens, Yanick. "Yanick Lahens: toujours ancrée." Interview by Nadève Ménard in *Ecrits d'Haïti. Perspectives sur la littérature haïtienne contemporaine (1986-2006),* edited by Nadève Ménard, 189-95. Paris: Editions Kharthala, 2011.

Lahens, Yanick. *Bain de Lune.* Paris: Sabine Wespieser Editeur, 2014.

Lahens, Yanick."Yanick Lahens-Bain de lune." Filmed Sept. 29, 2014. Youtube video, 4:41. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZRuNDXAYmI.

Lahens, Yanick. *Moonbath.* Translated by Emily Gogolak. Dallas: DeepVellum Publishing, 2017.

Lahens, Yanick. "Haïti, les désirs de la table." *Libération,* Mar. 16, 2018. https://next.liberation.fr/food/2018/03/16/haiti-les-desirs-de-la-table_1636751.

Lahens, Yanick. "Episode 1: l'ancrage dans Port-au-Prince." Interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue,* France Culture, Nov. 11, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-15-lancrage-dans-port-au-prince.

Lahens, Yanick. "Episode 2: Haïti une histoire déniée et retrouvée." Interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue,* France Culture, Nov. 12, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-25-haiti-une-histoire-deniee-et-retrouvee.

Lahens, Yanick. "Episode 3: Haïti microcosme du monde." Interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue,* France Culture, Nov. 13, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-35-haiti-microcosme-du-monde.

Lahens, Yanick. "Episode 4: Etre sur la brèche, écrire sur la faille." Interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue,* France Culture, Nov. 14, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-45-etre-sur-la-breche-ecrire-sur-la-faille.

Lahens, Yanick. "Episode 5: Urgence(s) d'écrire, rêve(s) d'habiter." Interview by Elise Gruaud. *A voix nue,* France Culture, Nov. 15, 2019. Audio, 28:00. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/a-voix-nue/yanick-lahens-ecrire-haiti-55-urgences-decrire-reves-dhabiter.

Lahire, Bernard. *Kafka, éléments pour une théorie de la création littéraire.* Paris: La Découverte, 2010.

Lahire, Bernard, ed. *Ce qu'ils vivent, ce qu'ils écrivent: mises en scène littéraire du social et experiences socialisatrices des écrivains.* Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines du social, 2011.

Lahire, Bernard. "Avoir la vocation." *Sciences sociales et Sport* 2, no.12 (2018): 143 150.

Lapierre, Nicole. *Causes communes. Des juifs et des noirs*. Paris: Stock, 2011.

Larrier, Renée. *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.

Larrier, Renée. "Sont-ils encore des gens de Guadeloupe?" *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 11, no. 1 and 2 (June 2008): 171-187.

Larrier, Renée. "A Tradition of Literacy: Césaire in and out of the Classroom." *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 1(Spring 2010): 33-45.

Lejeune, Pierre. *Le Pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Seuil, 1975.

Lenoble, Alex. "U.S. occupation and Franketienne's Schizophrenic Writing." *Journal of Haitian Studies* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 322-349.

Leperlier, Tristan. *Algérie, les écrivains dans la décennie noire.* Paris: CNRS Editions, 2018.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider.* Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984.

Luce, Xavier, and Fanny Margras. "Schwarz-Bart et Condé, du pays natal retrouver le fumet…"*Continents Manuscrits Génétique des textes littéraires* 16 (2021). https://journals.openedition.org/coma/6590.

Lucrèce, André. *Civilisés et Energumènes. De l'enseignement aux Antilles.* Paris: L'harmattan, 1981.

Ludwig, Ralph, ed. *Ecrire la parole de la nuit; La nouvelle littéraire antillaise.* Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

Lugones, Maria. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypathia* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 742-759.

Lutz, Helma. "Intersectionality brilliant career- How to understand the attraction of a concept." *Working Paper Series Gender, Diversity and Migration*, 1 (2014): 1-19. http://www.fb03.uni- frankfurt.de/51634119/Lutz_WP.pdf.

Mackward, Christiane P. and Madeleine Cottenet-Hage, eds. *Dictionnaire littéraire des femmes de langue française : De Marie de France à Marie Ndiaye.* Paris : Khartala, 1996.

Maertens, Lucile and Adrienne Stork. "The Real Stories of Haiti's Forests. Changing the narrative around deforestation and charcoal in Haiti." *Books and Ideas*, Oct. 9, 2017.

https://booksandideas.net/The-Real-Story-of-Haiti-s-Forests.html.

Magloire, Danièle. "L'antiféminisme en Haïti." in *Déjouer le silence. Contre-discours sur les femmes haïtiennes,* Edited by Sabine Lamour, Denyse Côté and Darline Alexis, 199-212. Montréal: Les Editions du remue-ménage/Mémoire d'encrier, 2018.

Malela, Buata. *Les écrivains afro-antillais à Paris (1920-1960); Stratégies et postures identitaires*. Paris: Khartala, 2008.

Mangeon, Anthony. "Miroirs des littératures nègres: d'une anthologie l'autre, revues." *Gradhiva* 10 (2009): 40-63. https://journals.openedition.org/gradhiva/1491.

Mangeon, Anthony, ed. *Postures postcoloniales. Domaines africains et antillais.* Paris: Khartala, 2012.

Margras, Fanny. "Pluies et vents sur Solitude, Etude de la réception des oeuvres d'André et Simone Schwarz-Bart en Guadeloupe en 1972." *Continents Manuscrits Génétique des textes littéraires,* no. 16 (2021): 1-27. https://journals.openedition.org/coma/6625.

Markovich, Malka. "Genèse d'une réflexion sur les sensibilités collectives des années 60 au regard du succès du *Dernier des Justes." Continents Manuscrits Génétique des textes littéraires,* no. 16 (2021): 1-28. https://journals.openedition.org/coma/6092.

Mauger, Gérard. "Les autobiographies littéraires. Objets et outils de recherche sur les milieux populaires." *Politix*, 7, no. 27 (1994): 32-44.

Melas, Natalie. *All the difference in the world.* Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Melas, Natalie. "Témoignages de la femme somnambule : l'ironie du Postcolonial au féminin." In *Genres et Postcolonialisme. Dialogues transcontinentaux,* edited by Anne-Emmanuelle Berger and Eleni Varikas (Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines, 2011), 121-129.

Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories/ Global Design: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Milligan, Jennifer. *The Forgotten Generation: French Women Writers of the Inter War Period.* Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1997.

Moi, Toril. *Simone de Beauvoir. The making of an intellectual woman* (Oxford:

Blackwell, 1994.

Mosher, Sarah. "Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* as Fictitious Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction." *Journal of Haitian Studies* 16, no.1 (Spring 2010): 144-156.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark, Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.* New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Mudimbe, Valentin, ed. *The Surreptitious Speech. Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992.

Mulot, Stéphanie. "La matrifocalité caribbéenne n'est pas un mirage créole." *L'homme. Revue française d'Anthropologie,* 208-209 (2013): 159-191. https://journals.openedition.org/lhomme/24691#tocto2n4.

Naudier, Delphine. "Sociologie d'un miracle éditorial dans un context féministe."*Genèses* 64 (2006): 67-87.

Naudier, Delphine. "Les écrivaines et leurs arrangements avec les assignations sexuées." *Sociétés Contemporaines* 2, no. 78 (2010): 39-63.

Nesbitt, Nick. *Voicing Memory. History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003.

Nesbitt, Nick. "Edouard Glissant and the Poetics of Truth." *The C.L.R. James Journal* 18, no.1 (Fall 2012): 102-115.

Newson Adele and Linda Strong-Leek, eds. *Winds of Change; The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars.* New York: P.Lang, 1998.

N'goran, David K. *Le Champ littéraire africain : essai pour une théorie*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009.

Orlando, Valérie. "The Politics of Race and Patriarchy in *Claire-Solange âme africaine* by Suzanne Lacascade." *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature* 21, no.1 (2005): 118-134.

Ouaknin, Marc-Alain. *Tsimtsoun, Introduction à la meditation hébraïque.* Paris: Albin Michel, 1992.

Ouaknin, Marc-Alain. *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud.* Translated by Llewellyn Brown. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Palmiste, Clara. "La sécularisation du personnel enseignant en Guadeloupe (1880

1914). Enjeux sexués et raciaux en contexte colonial." *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 50 (2019): 37-61.

Pamphile, Leon D. "America's Policy-making in Haitian Education, 1915-1934." *The Journal of Negro Education* 54, no.1 (Winter 1985): 99-108.

Pavard, Bibia. *Les éditions des femmes. Histoire des premières années 1972-1979.* Paris : L'Harmattan, 2005.

Pfaff, Françoise. *Entretiens avec Maryse Condé*. Paris: Karthala, 1993.

Pfaff, Françoise. *Conversations with Maryse Condé*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

Pfaff, Françoise. *Nouveaux entretiens avec Maryse Condé; écrivain et témoin de son temps*. Paris: Karthala, 2016.

Pineau, Gisèle. *La Grande Drive des Esprits.* Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 1993.

Pineau, Gisèle. *L'Exil selon Julia.* Paris: Stock, 1993.

Pineau, Gisèle. *The Drifting of Spirits.* Translated by Michael Dash. London: Quartet, 1999.

Pineau, Gisèle. *Exile according to Julia*. Translated by Betty Wilson. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003.

Pineau, Gisèle. *Mes quatre femmes.* Paris: Philippe Ray, 2007.

Pineau, Gisèle. "Cinq questions pour île-en-île." Interview by Thomas Spears, June 11, 2009, audio, 33:00, https://ile-en-ile.org/gisele-pineau-5-questions-pour-ile-en-ile/.

Pineau, Gisèle et Marie Abraham. *Femmes des Antilles; Traces et Voix cent cinquante ans aprèsl'abolition de l'esclavage.* Paris: Stock, 1998.

Plougastel, Yann, and Simone Schwarz-Bart. *Nous n'avons pas vu passer les jours.* Paris: Grasset, 2019.

Price-Mars, Jean. *Ainsi parla l'oncle. Essais d'ethnographie.* New York: Parapsychology Foundation Inc., 1928.

Racine, Nicole, and Michel Trebitsch, eds. *Intellectuelles. Du Genre en histoire des intellectuels.* Brussels: Editions Complexe, 2004.

Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics.* Translated by Steven Corcoran. London/New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.

Réjouis, Rose-Myriam. Translator's preface to *Love, Anger, Madness: a Haitian Trilogy,* by Marie Chauvet, xix-xx. Translated by Rose-Myriam Réjouis. New York: Modern Library, 2009.

Rinne, Suzanne, and Joëlle Vitiello, eds. *Elles écrivent des Antilles; Haïti, Guadeloupe, Martinique*. Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997.

Robenson, Bernard. "L'école Elie Dubois: Un nom, une histoire." *Le Nouvelliste*, July 1, 2005. https://lenouvelliste.com/article/15521/lecole-elie-dubois-un-nom-une-histoire.

Rothberg, Michel. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization.* Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Roumain, Jacques. *Gouverneur de la Rosée.* Paris: Editions Messidor, 1946.

Roumain, Jacques. *Masters of the Dew.* Translated by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook. Portsmouth: Heinemann, Caribbean Writers Series, 1978.

Said, Edward. *Representations of the Intellectual.* New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Sapiro, Gisèle. "La vocation artistique, entre don et don de soi." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 3, no.168 (2007): 4-11.

Sapiro, Gisèle. "Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire" Les Conditions de formation de la vocation d'écrivain." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 3, no.168 (2007): 12-33.

Sapp, Robert. "The Talking Dead: Narrating the Past in Yanick Lahens's 'Bain de Lune.'" *Journal of Haitian Studies* 23, no. 1 (spring 2017): 119-134.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Orphée noir*, In *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française.* Edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor, ix-xliv. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Présentation." *Les Temps Modernes* 1 (Oct. 1945): 1-8.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*. Paris: Gallimard, 1948.

Schwarz-Bart, André. *Le dernier des Justes.* Paris: Seuil, 1959.

Schwarz-Bart, André. *The Last of the Just.* Translated by Stephen Becker. New York: Antheneum, 1960.

Schwarz-Bart, André. "Pourquoi j'ai écrit *la Mulâtresse Solitude.* André Schwarz-Bart s'explique sur huit ans de silence." *Le Figaro littéraire* 1084 (Jan. 1967): 1& 8-9.

Schwarz-Bart, André, and Simone Schwarz-Bart. *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes.* Paris: Seuil, 1967.

Schwarz-Bart, Simone. *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle*. Paris: Seuil, 1972.

Schwarz-Bart, Simone. *Ti Jean l'horizon*. Paris: Seuil, 1979.

Schwarz-Bart, Simone. *The Bridge of Beyond.* Translated by Barbara Bray. New York: Penguin Random House, 2013.

Schwarz-Bart, Simone. "5 questions pour ile en ile." Interview by Thomas Spears. July 20 & 29, 2010. Audio, 68:00. http://ile-en-ile.org/simone-schwarz-bart-5-questions-pour-ile-en-ile/.

Schwarz-Bart, Simone. "Simone Schwarz-Bart ou le devoir d'amour." Interview by Martin Quenehen. *A voix nue,* France Culture, Oct., 16-20, 2017. Audio, 2:19:51. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFMq5tRaKBs.

Schwarz-Bart, Simone. "Simone et André Schwarz-Bart, la mémoire en partage."Interview by Camille Clavel, 2018, video, 52:00.

Schwarz-Bart, Simone. "Epouser quelqu'un hors de sa culture, ça dessille votre regard." Interview by Annick Cojean, *Le Monde,* oct. 11, 2020.

Scharfman, Ronnie. "Mirroring and Mothering in Simone Schwarz-Bart's Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle and Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea" *Yale French Studies,* 62 (1981): 88-106.

Scharfman, Ronnie. "Significantly Others." in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, edited by Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, 209-222. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993.

Scholem, Gershom. *Le messianisme juif.* Paris: Calman Levy, 1974.

Scholem, Gershom. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism.* New York: Schoken, 1995.

Scholem, Gershom. *La mystique juive, les thèmes fondamentaux.* Translated by Maurice R.Hayoun. Paris: Cerf, 1985.

Seebacher, Jacques. "Le côté de la mort ou l'histoire comme Clinique." *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 74e Année no. 5 (Sept. - Oct. 1974): 810-823.

Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean. *Negritude Women*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Simasotchi-Bronès, Françoise, ed. *Maryse Condé en tous ses ailleurs.* Paris : Editions L'improviste, 2014.

Smith, Robert, P., Jr. "Michèle Lacrosil: Novelist with a color complex." *The French Review* 47, no. 4: 783-790.

Smith, Robert, P., Jr. "Black like that: Paulette Nardal and the negritude Salon." *CLA Journal* 45, no. 1 (Sept. 2001): 53-68.

Sourieau, Marie-Agnès. "Entretien avec Maryse Condé: de l'identité Culturelle." *The French Review* 72, no. 6 (May 1999): 1091-1098.

Spears, Thomas. "Marie Chauvet: The Fortress still Stands." *Yale French Studies*, no. 128 (2015): 9-24.

Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed B. "An Interview with Maryse Condé and Rita Dove." *Callaloo*, 14, no.2 (Spring 1991): 347-366.

Tardieu-Dehoux, Charles. *L'éducation en Haïti de la période coloniale à nos jours (1980).* Port-au-Prince : Imprimerie Henry Deschamp, 1990.

Tarrica, Estelle. "Jewish mysticism and the Ethics of Decolonization in André Schwarz-Bart." *Yale French Studies* 118/119 (2010): 75-90.

Thomas, Bonnie. "Memory and Relation in Gisèle Pineau's *Mes quatre femmes*," *The French Review* 86, no. 1 (Oct. 2012): 136-146.

Tinsley, Natasha. "Open Roses, Closed Gardens, and Invisible Women: queering the tropical garden in the poetry of Ida Salomon Faubert." *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme* 23, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 52-57.

Toureille, Julien. "La dissidence dans les Antilles françaises: une mémoire à préserver (1945-2011)." *Revue d'Histoire des armées* 270 (2013): 68-78.

Toumson, Roger and Eliane Toumson "Interview avec Simone et André Schwarz-Bart. Sur les pas de Fanottes." *Textes Etudes et Documents* 2 (1979): 13-23.

Toureh, Fanta. *L'imaginaire dans l'oeuvre de Simone Schwarz-Bart. Approche d'une mythologie antillaise.* Paris: L'harmattan, 1997.

Traverso, Enzo. *La pensée dispersée. Figures de l'exil judéo-allemand.* Paris: Editions Leo Sheer, 2004.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

Vergès, Françoise. *La mémoire enchainée. Questions sur l'esclavage.* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006).

Vergès, Françoise. *Le ventre des femmes. Capitalisme, racialisation, Féminisme.* Paris: Albin Michel, 2017.

Wagneur, Jean-Didier. "Un brin de causette autour d'Hugo." *Libération* June 17, 1993. http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/Groupugo/Textes_et_documents/JS/Lib%C3%A9ration.pdf.

APPENDICE 1 : Interview with Maryse Condé

ENTRETIEN AVEC MARYSE CONDE L
Le 5 août 2017 à 15h
dans le salon de son domicile personnel de Gordes, petite ville du Vaucluse en France.

La première question portait sur vos origines familiales, mais j'ai bien lu « Saveurs et les mots » « un cœur à rire et à pleurer » donc j'ai bien les origines maternelles, mais pour votre père, au niveau de vos grands parents ?
Mon père avait une spécialité c'était de s'inventer une origine, tantôt il disait que son père était un marin qui faisait à l'année la liaison Point à Pitre Valparaiso, tantôt il disait que son père était un commerçant, un commerçant de la Grande Terre. En fait mais dernièrement une de mes amies faisant une recherche sur moi elle a découvert que ma famille paternelle, elle venait de la Désirade. C'étaient des paysans, des cultivateurs qui venaient de la Désirade, qui étaient allés se fixer à Petit Bourg. Donc je crois que cette version est plus vraie que le père marin, etc., je crois que c'était des cultivateurs d'origine Désiradienne.
Ils habitaient Point à Pitre ?
Ils ont habité d'abord à Petit Bourg et ensuite à Point à Pitre .
Et sa mère elle faisait quoi ?
Je crois qu'elle faisait des ménages mais elle est morte pendant qu'il était en train de jouer au foot Ball, elle est morte lors d'un écobuage dans un incendie de sa case. Et je ne sais comment, à la suite de quoi, il est devenu pupille de la Nation, ce qui est en principe réservé aux enfants de parents militaires, il est devenu pupille de la Nation, et il a fait toutes ses études avec des bourses et des subventions de la France.
Et il est allé jusqu'à quel niveau ?
Oh assez loin pour l'époque, il a été instituteur. A Paris avec des camarades il a fondé cette petite banque « la caisse coopérative des prêts » dont il était secrétaire général, je crois.
Juste par rapport à votre mère, son père que vous décrivez dans « Victoire, saveur, et les mots. » Vous avez retrouvé un peu la trace ?
Enfin retrouver c'est beaucoup dire. Je crois que j'ai imaginé beaucoup, oui c'est surtout imagination, approximation, déduction, mais je n'ai pas de preuves.
Argellus vous ne saviez pas vraiment
Un homme politique qui était assez important à l'époque, qui avait des partisans noirs. Tout était basé à l'époque sur la couleur, lui il était le champion, le héros des noirs.
Il était à Marie Galante ?
Oui
Vous parlez de votre frère Sandrino dans le livre «Le cœur à rire et à pleurer… », qui lui aussi souhaitait d'être écrivain.
Oui.
Est-ce qu'il a été un modèle pour vous ?
Euh ! Non pas vraiment mais comme il avait la même maladie de beaucoup de Boucolons, maladie héréditaire il ne pouvait plus écrire donc il me dictait de longues pages de ses livres qui étaient en général tous refusés par les maisons d'Edition. Non ce n'était pas un modèle mais je crois quand même que quelque part il m'a donné le

goût d'écrire mais il présentait à travers lui, je voyais l'écriture comme un idéal que je ne pourrais jamais atteindre. Tous ses romans étaient refusés.

Oui. Pour quelle raison ?

Pas bons, pas bons, je crois, bavard, verbeux et je crois j'ai commencé à écrire tard en essayant de résoudre ce handicap. Je n'avais pas une image positive de l'écriture et de l'écrivain donc j'ai hésité avant de me lancer et je me suis lancée avec une sorte de timidité.

Est-ce que le fait d'être femme aussi c'était un…?

Non parce que j'étais très arrogante. Quand j'étais jeune, convaincue que j'étais intelligente, peut-être la femme la plus intelligente du monde, je n'avais aucun complexe. Ma couleur ne me gênait pas, pas beaucoup en tout cas, euh non non, pas du tout.

Et votre frère qu'est ce qui lui avait donné envie d'être écrivain ?

Je crois… non je ne sais pas.

Est-ce qu'au niveau de la lecture aussi il vous … ?

Oui il me faisait lire, il m'a passé des auteurs qu'il trouvait intéressants il m'a fait lire tout Zobel. C'est lui qui m'a fait lire. Sans lui, je n'aurais pas connu la littérature antillaise. Du temps où j'étais au lycée, on apprenait que la littérature française blanche mais grâce à lui j'ai eu une sorte d'aperçu sur la littérature de notre pays, de nos pays.

Et lui il côtoyait aussi de écrivains de son époque ?

Oui, il côtoyait beaucoup les Haïtiens, il était grand ami d'Idriss St Amans qui a fait le beau roman « Bon Dieu rit » c'était son grand ami.

Il avait fait des études de Droit ?

Oui de Droit.

Et dans « La Vie sans fard » Vous dîtes que l'écriture pour vous est venue comme une nécessité...

Ben j'avais peur d'écrire, pas confiance en moi en tant qu'écrivain, et puis un jour je n'ai pas pu résister je me suis jetée là-dedans. Mais c'est pas une démarche agréable, il m'a fallu faire un effort, dominer mes peurs avant d'y arriver.

C'était plus la publication ou l'écriture en soi ?

Les deux.

Finalement l'expérience en Afrique vous avez côtoyé beaucoup…, vous c'était un moment particulier…

D'abord de par mes opinions politiques écrire me paraissait un peu un jeu de bourgeois. Déjà. Pour écrire il fallait faire du théâtre parce que là on a un rapport immédiat, plus direct avec ceux qu'on appelait « le peuple », les masses donc il a fallu vaincre tous ces préjugés avant d'avoir le courage de faire un roman.

Ah oui parce que vous pensiez qu'à travers l'écriture vous vous éloigniez des masses ou c'était un moyen d'avoir un …

Ben je pense que l'écriture détournait du vrai militantisme, on se faisait plaisir, on rêvait, on imaginait au lieu de se battre. Pour moi l'écriture, après j'ai compris que l'écriture pouvait être une forme de combat, mais au départ l'écriture c'est un peu une diversion.

Et vous voyez les auteurs de la Négritude comme A Césaire, Senghor

Oui pas encore, je ne les connaissais pas

C'est après en les lisant

Après là, j'ai compris que l'écriture était une arme. Césaire avait un recueil de poésies qu'il appelle Les armes miraculeuses ». Après j'ai compris, au début je me méfiais de ma tendance, de mon goût pour l'écriture.

Et oui et en même temps vous faisiez des études de Lettres

Oui

Mais à cette époque vous ne vous imaginiez pas être écrivain ?

Pas du tout.

Mais en Afrique vous côtoyez un milieu intellectuel

Oui beaucoup de haïtiens qui écrivaient Roger Dorsainvil Gérard C oui c'étaient des amis, Jean Brière. Oui mais c'était pas parce qu'ils étaient écrivains, oui c'est simplement parce que nous avions la même vision anticolonialiste, l'écriture venait après.

Vous êtes revenue en France pour rédiger votre thèse tout rédigeant le roman Heremakhonon ?

Oui

Et vous avez travaillé à Présence Africaine comme journaliste ?

Oui après, je crois que j'ai d'abord fait la thèse puis je suis rentrée à Présence Africaine.

OK car le premier roman c'était en 1976…

Oui Heremakhonon

Là j'ai une question un peu précise. C'est grâce à Stanislas Adotevi?

Oui parce que moi je me compare à Mariamma Bâ. Si on avait pas un ami qui était dans le domaine des éditions, qui nous encourageait à écrire, à publier je crois qu'on aurait jamais eu cette audace. Oui Stan a été le premier à aimer ce que je faisais et le 1 er à m'encourager à continuer.

D'accord parce qu' il dirigeait une collection « La voix des autres. »

Oui la voix des autres à 10 18.

Et dans cette collection 10 18 je me demandais quelle était sa place sur la scène littéraire à cette époque ?

Oh c'était Christian Bourgeois qui dominait, Stanislas était un adjoint assez peu connu. Mais alors il n'y avait pas de place pour la littérature faite par des gens non français, je crois que Stan a été un des pionniers.

Mais il y avait aussi une autre collection Féminin Futur dans cette même Edition, mais il n'y avait pas de liens, vous n'aviez pas trop de liens avec cette collection?

Non, non. Aucun lien

Mais Stalinas Adotevi vous l'aviez rencontré à Présence Africaine

Ah oui sûrement, à Présence sûrement.

Je me demandais aussi pourquoi vous n'aviez pas publié à Présence Africaine ?

Parce que mon livre n'a pas eu l'air de plaire, il était trop critique, Mr Diop n'aimait pas mon image de l'Afrique. Il n'aimait pas tout ce ce que je décrivais : la pauvreté, la misère, la corruption, les inégalités donc Présence n'en voulait pas.

Ah. Donc vous aviez essayé plusieurs Maison d'Edition ?

Oui j'ai essayé mais sachant qu'ils ne voudraient pas. Mais cela ne nous a pas empêché de rester très bons amis et de continuer à travailler chez eux pour eux, mais je savais que ma littérature ne leur plaisait pas.

Donc vous différenciez bien ?

Ah oui, oui.

Après vous dîtes que les critiques ont été un peu dures.

Ben on a guère parlé d'Heremakhonon. Je crois que le livre a été plutôt passé sous silence, oui quelques critiques ici ou là, mais très peu.

Et ça, comment vous l'expliquez ?

Ben dire en 1976 que l'Afrique n'était pas un paradis, que la révolution était ratée, quand on cherche le bonheur et qu'on ne le trouvait pas, c'était choquant.

C'était choquant oui. Mais vous dîtes même qu'il a été pilonné par Christian Bourgeois

Ah oui il ne s'est pas vendu, au bout d'un an Christian B l'a pilonné, tous les invendus sont pilonnés.

Ah oui d'accord, parce que vous aviez signé un contrat ?

Oui. J'ai fait un petit procès ou j'allais le menacer d'un procès, et il m'a payé je crois 5 000 francs pour avoir la paix. C'était les pratiques de l'époque : si un livre n'était pas vendu, on le pilonnait.

C'est-à-dire qu'ils arrêtaient de le promouvoir ?

Oui et de le vendre, c'est pour cela que ce livre a été republié après chez Robert Laffont.

Et ensuite vous publiez « Une saison à Rihatta. » aux Editions Robert Laffont

Oui

Là c'est par l'intermédiaire de Daniel Ratford qui était Guadeloupéen…

Oui il était Guadeloupéen. On est devenu ami je ne sais comment. Il m'a dit : « je vais publier ton roman ». Mais le livre n'a pas eu de succès non plus. En fait le succès est venu avec Ségou mais avant c'était l'indifférence totale.

Ah oui, d'accord. Et, Daniel Ratford vous l'aviez connu comme ça, à Paris…

Oui je crois. A Paris

Robert Laffont c'est un grand éditeur ?

Oui mais je ne sais plus comment …

Et là aussi vous aviez fait un contrat etc… ?

Oui

Mais bon ils ne vous ont pas pilonné …

Non le livre n'a pas de succès mais la Maison était assez grande pour supporter un petit échec, donc on m'a laissé en paix. Oui

Et en fait c'est aussi Daniel Ratford qui vous a commandé Ségou ?

Oui on discutait beaucoup chez eux, j'avais parlé d'un projet que j'inventais, il était enthousiaste et il me l'a commandé, on peut dire, il me l'a commandé mais sur ma proposition. Je lui ai dit et je l'ai séduit et il m'a dit « Bon OK vas-y ». Il m'a fait un contrat et j'ai écrit Ségou.

Car en fait c'étaient des recherches universitaires que vous aviez…

Oui j'étais en train de faire une thèse d'Etat sur les Mandingues donc une part de cette thèse est venue dans le livre, dans le roman.

D'accord. Si on reste sur la même époque, vous finissez votre thèse et vous commencez à enseigner à Paris, des vacations.
Oui à Paris 10, Paris 7 et Paris 12 oui je comptais enseigner.
Alors je me demandais si vous n'aviez fait que des vacations ou si on vous avait proposé un poste …?
Non pas de poste, pas question, vacations, mais je gagnais ma vie à la radio, en faisant beaucoup de radio pour RFI. J'enseignais et cela ne me rapportait rien, je gagnais ma vie matériellement avec la radio.
Et à RFI vous faisiez des émissions culturelles ?
Oui intéressant l'Afrique, des interviews d'auteurs, critiques de livres etc…etc
Ah donc là vous avez dû rencontrer beaucoup de monde…
Oui beaucoup de monde, beaucoup, beaucoup.
Le travail à la radio vous plaisait ?
J'aimais beaucoup, il y avait un côté, on peut dire ce qu'on veut, et on n'est pas inquiété, on est protégé par l'anonymat d'un studio.
Est-ce que vous avez essayé d'avoir un poste en France ?
Oh oui, j'ai essayé et mais à l'époque c'était impossible, impossible.
Parce qu'il n'y avait pas de département de littérature francophone...
Oui il y avait. Il y avait Madame Goré ?(inaudible) un centre à Paris 3 ; Robert Jaulin dirigeait un centre d'ethnologie et de littérature à Paris 7 oui il y avait, il y avait. On n'aurait jamais pensé confier un centre à un noir, femme ou homme, le racisme de l'époque était tel qu'on n'y pensait même pas. Et nous-mêmes, nous-même on ne demandait pas, on savait qu'on serait rejetté, on n'essayait pas. C'était une drôle d'époque, il n'y avait pas cette ? (inaudible). A l'époque le militantisme noir n'existait guère.
Pour moi c'est aux Etats-Unis que j'ai découvert la littérature de Caraïbes
Oui oui, oui c'est pour ça que nous avons été invités aux Etats-Unis et que nous sommes partis. Au moins on s'intéressait à nous. Ségou avait plu à Paris, avait largement été vendu mais personne n'aurait pensé à mettre Ségou dans un cours de littérature.
Ah oui, oui… Et je me demandais qu'est-ce qui vous a poussé à continuer à faire une thèse de Doctorat et à continuer la carrière académique parallèlement à une carrière d'écrivaine...
Oui il fallait gagner ma vie, donc la thèse s'imposait oui par nécessité. Il fallait vivre, je savais que la littérature ne permettait pas de vivre, il fallait choisir l'enseignement, oui.
Donc vous envisagiez d'enseigner en France ou pas forcément ?
Oui, c'était un rêve.
Mais vous avez quand même publié deux œuvres critiques fin des années 70 « La civilisation du Bossale » et « Parole de femmes. »
Oui
Là c'était difficile de trouver un éditeur ?
Non c'était *L'harmattan* je crois, qui était ouvert aux écrivains francophones, la première maison d'édition et la seule à l'époque.

Paroles de Femmes c'est assez inédit pour l'époque. Et est-ce que vous connaissiez les écrivaines ? Vous les côtoyiez ou pas vraiment ?
Oui, je crois. J'en connaissais quelques-unes, pas toutes mais j'oublie celles que je connaissais. Je connaissais les Haïtiennes qui étaient venues en France à Paris. Mais c'est tout.
Marie Chauvet vous la connaissez ?
Oui, on s'est rencontré à Paris, oui.
Simone Schwarz-Bart mais les autres n'ont pas eu beaucoup de succès finalement
Non, non. C'était une époque où la voix de la Femme n'était pas entendue, surtout la femme noire, il n'y avait pas de place pour elle. Et nous, on acceptait ; bizarrement, on n'essayait pas. Par exemple, au lieu de me battre pour être accepté en France, je suis partie à New York, oui la fuite, le choix d'un autre destin paraissait inévitable.
Les femmes n'avaient aucune place et vous n'aviez aucun lien avec les mouvements féministes ?
Aucun, aucun
Aux Etats-Unis vous partez en fullbright à Los Angeles en 1984…
Juste un an
Et ensuite vous rentrez en Guadeloupe ?
Oui
Est-ce qu'en Guadeloupe vous avez essayé d'enseigner ?
Oui j'ai essayé la radio, l'université, la culture en général par la Région. Et j'ai échoué partout. J'ai chômé, on est resté plus de 2 ans en Guadeloupe. Richard travaillait, il avait un poste de traducteur, professeur de traduction mais moi je chômais entièrement.
A l'Université Antilles Guyane
oui
RICHARD : non c'était la formation continue qui dépendait du département d'Anglais de la Martinique.
(Maryse) : Mais oui, l'université Antilles Guyane.
Et donc vous deviez faire les trajets en Martinique ?
Non il y avait un centre à Point-à-Pitre.
Ah d'accord, d'accord.
Mais on n'était pas très malheureux parce que j'avais gagné beaucoup d'argent avec Ségou, donc je chômais
Mais vous écriviez ?
Oui mais ce que je voulais pour gagner ma vie : la radio, l'université
Vous n'aviez pas d'activités annexes ?
Non aucunes activités annexes
Vous avez quand même publié trois romans
Lesquels ?
Tituba, La vie scélérate, et la Traversée de la Mangrove.
Oui oui, trois romans sur le fait d'être antillais, c'est quoi être antillais ?
Là c'était aux Mercure de France.
Parce que Madame Gallimard que je ne connaissais pas, avait tellement aimé Ségou, elle m'a demandé de venir chez elle faire un livre et j'ai accepté.

D'accord. Vous dîtes qu'elle vous avait demandé de faire un livre sur une figure féminine de la Guadeloupe ?
Oui voilà de la région antillaise. J'ai voulu Célia Cruz, puis la femme d'Aimé Césaire : Suzanne Césaire puis je me suis aperçue que cela marchait mal, finalement j'ai choisi Tituba.
Qui est excellent, j'ai adoré.
J'ai hésité mais j'ai choisi, oui.
Et la Vie scélérate et Traversée de la Mangrove aussi c'est très bien. Et ensuite on vous a invité à Berkeley ?
Oui
C'est là où la carrière aux Etats Unis a commencé ?
Oui
Quand vous étiez en Guadeloupe, est-ce que vous aviez des liens avec les écrivaines ou des écrivains là-bas ?
Non pas trop.
Plutôt vous étiez indépendante ?
Oui assez dans un coin, oui.
Et vous avez fait un petit peu de militantisme politique…
J'ai commencé, j'ai commencé. J'ai compris que l'écriture est la meilleure forme de militantisme. J'ai commencé à écrire
Vos livres à ce moment-là vos livres étaient traduits par Richard ?
Au début ils étaient traduits par je ne sais plus Barbara Bray. Après Richard est devenu mon traducteur officiel.
Et là pour les traductions c'est l'Editeur qui vous demande
C'est l'Editeur qui choisit, qui fait tout
Et pour Ségou ?
Il avait confié la traduction à Barbara Bray, traduction qui était mauvaise, nulle on a dû arranger de toute part, mais après j'ai commencé à avoir assez de statut pour demander d'avoir mon traducteur pour imposer mon traducteur.
Et là vous démarchiez les Maisons d'Edition aux Etats-Unis ?
Non, ça se fait entre maisons d'édition, entre maisons d'édition française et maisons d'édition américaine.
Ah oui parce qu'ils doivent acheter les droits ?
Ben oui.
Parce qu'ils doivent acheter les droits. Je comprends. Après aux Etats-Unis vous faites plusieurs universités pour finir à Columbia ?
Oui
Où vous dirigez le Centre d'Etudes Francophone ?
Oui
Et là votre activité d'écrivain et l'activité de critique comment se complétaient-elles ?
Ben les deux se complétaient bien, c'était agréable d'écrire, de critiquer les autres, d'écrire, de voir ce que les autres avaient fait, oui cela allait bien ensemble.
Et cela vous a aidé dans votre pratique d'écriture personnelle ?
Oui je crois.

Est-ce que cela vous a permis aussi d'avoir une certaine reconnaissance … ?
Oui mais je crois, que j'enseignais en Amérique, j'étais traduite par mon mari Richard, donc tout un faisceau me permettait d'atteindre un certain public.
Par exemple par rapport au mouvement sur la créolité vous avez pu organiser un colloque
Contre
Un colloque pour exprimer
Oui avec Madeleine Hage qui était une amie qui enseignait avec moi-même, on a fait un colloque pour dire ce qu'on pensait de la créolité.
Est-ce que vous aviez des contacts directs avec les écrivains ?
Oui, avec Chamoiseau, Confiant, on n'était en contact, Glissant aussi
Glissant était professeur aussi …
Glissant et moi on n'a jamais été de grands amis mais on s'estimait, on se voyait, on se fréquentait, on était poli oui ce n'était pas un ami et pas non plus un ennemi.
Et quand vous avez commencé à enseigner aux Etats Unis, les Littératures Francophones commençaient à être enseignées, vous étiez un peu au début...
Il y avait juste Césaire qui était connu, mais nous nous avons travaillé à faire connaitre d'autres écrivains, qui étaient aussi bons que Césaire mais qui n'étaient pas du tout connus.
Tels que ?
Zobel, Vincent Bracoli…oui toute cette génération.
Et là est-ce que le fait d'être une femme dans l'académie américaine cela vous a aidé ou pas vraiment ?
Non pas d'incidence, non
Donc parallèlement vous avez continué à publier des romans ?
Oui
Donc une fois que vous aviez vos éditeurs c'était facile de proposer …
Ben oui j'avais un contrat, je proposais tous les ans, tous les 2 ans, c'était facile
Pour la réception critique vous pensez que la réception critique était plus importante…
Je crois qu'aux Etats-Unis on fait plus attention qu'en France à nos livres. Je suis un peu étonnée, les choses changent. Mon dernier livre qui est paru en Mai 2017 a eu les honneurs du « Nouvel Observateur » « «du Monde », du « Point », du « Journal Dimanche » mais c'est un phénomène totalement nouveau. Avant quand j'ai commencé à écrire il y a 20 ans ou 30 ans, si on avait un article dans un grand journal, on pouvait penser qu'on était heureux. Ça change.
Vous voyez une évolution ?
Oui quand même.
Mais est-ce que vous pensez que votre dernier roman c'est parce qu'il traite d'un fait actuel, d'actualité ?
Oui mais je pense que quand Heremakhonon a paru il parlait d'un problème actuel, mais on ne voulait pas entendre nos voix, nos avis ne comptaient pas.
Oui d'accord. Mais par contre 10 ans plus tard, il y a eu quand même des articles écrits mais au sein de l'université américaine.
Oui mais après, après

Et chaque fois qu'un livre est traduit en anglais vous avez aussi des retours ?
C'est Richard qui fait. Moi un livre en anglais n'est pas un livre à moi. C'est lui que ça intéresse, qui regarde.
Par exemple vous dîtes que Ségou est devenu un peu un classique aux Etats Unis
Oui, il est beaucoup étudié à l'université, même dans les écoles secondaires, je le sais
RICHARD: Il est devenu un Penguin Classics. Il est sorti en livre de Poche
Ah oui d'accord. Et les prix ?
Malheureusement je n'ai eu que des prix secondaires : le prix Tropique, le prix Marguerite Yourcenar, le prix littéraire de la Femme, le grand prix du Roman Métisse. Je n'ai jamais eu un vrai grand prix littéraire et Daniel ?? dans un article récent a donné sa raison qui est peut-être la bonne. Il dit que je parle trop franchement, trop ouvertement, je critique un peu trop ouvertement, il a peut-être raison. Cela ne plait pas, je ne sais pas… [1]
Après les récits autobiographiques, «Le cœur à rire et à pleure. » en 2001 puis en 2006 « Victoire des saveurs et des mots. », et puis plus récemment « La vie sans fard » et « Mets et merveilles », là est-ce que vous avez eu une réception un peu plus importante ou pas vraiment ?
Toujours j'ai toujours une assez bonne réception mais là surtout *La vie sans fard* a bien marché, *Mets et Merveilles* je ne crois pas. Oui une réception intéressée. Oui
Qu'est-ce qui vous a poussé à rédiger des récits autobiographiques ?
J'avais envie de parler de moi, de mettre fin à des méprises, des contrevérités, des simplifications, de me présenter telle que je suis, telle que je veux que l'on me connaisse.
Oui. Dans les premiers romans il y avait toujours débats entre fiction et réalité …
Mais oui, oui.
Vos liens avec les médias ?
Ben ça dépend, j'ai eu tous les médias dernièrement ils sont venus même venus à Gordes ici, oui. Le nouvel Obs est venu à Gordes, c'est un peu récent, c'est un peu nouveau, oui .
Vous expliquez comment cet intérêt ?
Je crois que maintenant j'atteins un âge où je suis un peu un phénomène, une sorte de oui d'étrangeté « elle écrit encore, elle écrit toujours. » C'est un peu ça.
Après New York vous êtes retournée en Guadeloupe, puis à Paris. Le fait d'être à Paris ce n'était pas plus facile ?
Oui. Je suis revenue parce que j'étais malade.
Pour des raisons de santé.
Oui pour des raisons de santé, non cela n'a rien changé, non.
Et en Guadeloupe ?
Inconnue, ignorée
Mais vous pensez que cela change peut-être ?
Oui un peu, un peu, mais en gros ignorée, oui ça change mais c'est normal, « nul n'est jamais prophète en son Pays. »
Vous y êtes retournée récemment …

[1] Entre temps, elle a reçu le prix nobel "alternatif" de littérature en 2018.

J'y étais il y a 2 ans ou. Maintenant ils font un peu d'effort, ils m'ont invité pour Mémorial Act. Mais pour dire qu'on me lit vraiment, qu'on me connait vraiment « non »

Ce n'est pas facile. Est-ce que vous continuez les activités politiques ou pas du tout ?

Pas du tout, maintenant j'essaie de penser à ma santé qui est très mauvaise.

Mais je pense que votre dernier roman, vous avez quand même le courage d'écrire sur un sujet très politique et d'actualité

Oui oui et moderne

Pas beaucoup d'autres écrivains se sont encore saisis du sujet

L'éditeur voulait que j'enlève tout ce qui avait trait au terrorisme, j'ai refusé, j'ai dit « autant faire un autre roman ou bien tu le prends comme ça ou tu le laisses » il l'a pris comme ça. Au départ non, il avait je crois peur.

Finalement vous avez des retours sur les ventes ou pas trop ?

Pas encore, trop tôt.

Est-ce que vous continuez d'autres projets ?

Non maintenant j'ai fini de faire un livre pour enfants, parce que c'est dur pour moi de ne pas écrire, mais je pense qu'il est temps de s'arrêter.

Car ce dernier livre vous l'avez dicté c'est ça … ?

Dicté à Richard, à une amie Régine donc c'était un peu difficile, très difficile même

Parce que c'est différent non ?

Ben le rapport d'intimité qu'on a avec son texte était rompu, mais on s'est débrouillé tant bien que mal, on y est arrivé quand même.

Et j'avais des questions sur votre famille, vous avez eu 4 enfants, vos filles que font-elles ?

Une est économiste en Haïti. Une est avocate, et la 3ème travaille dans une Maison d'assurance AXA

Ah donc il y en a une qui vit en Haïti…

Oui depuis 2 ans. Les 2 autres sont à Paris

Et vous avez combien de petits enfants ?

Je crois 5 et 2 arrières petits-enfants.

Et vous dîtes que vous avez commencé à écrire une fois que vos enfants ont été plus grands…

Oui

Et est-ce qu'ils ont lu vos œuvres ?

Pas beaucoup. Par exemple une l'ainée Sylvie a lu le dernier livre mais les deux autres je ne crois pas, elles sont en train de le lire, mais depuis le temps, elles ont commencé mais pas fini, non. Ce n'est pas là que j'ai mes Fans, non

Il va être traduit en anglais.

Je ne sais pas il vient de sortir. C'est un peu tôt.

Vous avez écrit aussi des pièces de théâtre

Oui au début et après une m'a été commandée par un acteur que j'aime beaucoup Gilbert Lemort, et l'autre m'a été commandé par une fille qui voulait une adaptation d'un roman à moi[2]. Mais autrement je fais très peu de théâtre.

Oui, oui. Vous avez préféré la fiction ou les récits ?

[2] Eva Doumbia a mis en scène le récit autobiographique "La vie sans fard" et des extraits de "Ségou".

Oui maintenant
Est-ce que vous vous considérez comme une écrivaine française, Guadeloupéenne ou « francophone » ?
Je crois Guadeloupéenne
Ou de littérature Monde ?
Oui, oui oui.
Et comment voyez-vous l'avenir de la littérature en Guadeloupe, Martinique
Ben je ne vois pas, qui écrit maintenant ? La relève est assurée par qui ? Je ne sais pas. Je ne vois pas du tout l'avenir.
Est-ce que vous avez des contacts avec les écrivaines ?
Avec Fabienne Kanor qui est martiniquaise, avec Simone Schwarz-Bart un peu quand je vais au Pays, très peu, avec Pineau un peu, mais c'est pas essentiel non.
Et avec Haïti ?
Oui avec Yanick Lahens, Evelyne Trouillot. Mais ce sont des amies plus que de contact de littérature, ce sont des amies, on parle un peu de tout.
Quels conseils donneriez-vous à quelqu'un qui souhaiterait devenir écrivain ? «
Aucun. « Vas-y, jette-toi à l'eau, fais ce que tu crois, n'écoute **surtout** pas les conseils. »
Est-ce qu'il y a eu des œuvres qui ont été refusées à la publication ?
Non, non quand je voyais qu'un texte ne plaisait pas comme c'est le cas des « belles ténébreuses », je changeais d'éditeur.
La vie scélérate en 87 vous l'avez publié chez Seghers ?
Oui mais c'est Laffont c'est la même maison. Lafont-Seghers, c'est une réunion.
D'accord. Et à Paris il y a Lattès aussi. Eux vous les avez connus comment ? Plutôt les récits autobiographiques d'ailleurs
parce que Laurent Laffont est parti fonder une maison d'Edition avec sa sœur Lattès. Et quand j'ai eu des problèmes avec Laffont, je suis revenue vers lui, c'est un ancien je le connaissais depuis longtemps.
Donc vous ne publiez plus avec Laffont ?
Non parce que je ne sais pas pourquoi…Parce que je ne vendais pas assez je crois, mais non, j'ai quitté pour Lattès.
Le fait d'être aux Etats Unis mais à New York c'était quelque chose de… ?
J'aimais, j'adorais New York, j'adorais Columbia, j'adorais mes étudiants, j'adorais travailler avec eux, c'était un moment privilégié.
Je trouve qu'aux Etats-Unis c'est incroyable…
Ben oui, le rapport qu'on établit avec son sujet et avec les étudiants est unique, unique.
Est-ce que vous avez encore des contacts ?
Oui beaucoup, beaucoup, même mes étudiants viennent me voir à Gordes. ? ? (inaudible) Kaïma Glover, Kavita Singh.
Oui je l'ai connu à Cornell.
Elle est venue nous voir à Paris avec son mari qui est un écrivain, un espagnol écrivain. On a de très bons rapports.
Est-ce que vous pensez qu'en France ça va changer au niveau de…
C'est en train de changer un peu, j'ai lu dans *Le Monde* un article sur Eva Doumbia une jeune femme de théâtre d'origine ivoirienne

Et vous pensez que les littératures d'expression française d'Afrique et des Caraïbes vont être plus enseignées
Peut-être, je ne sais pas, je ne peux pas dire, peut-être.
Eva Doumbia c'est elle qui a fait une représentation théâtrale de…
De Ségou et *La Vie sans Fard* au théâtre de *La Criée* de Marseille.
Et cela a eu du succès ?
Je crois, la salle était comble.
Ah oui. Et quand vous étiez au Sénégal, vous avez connu Sembène Ousmane
Oui, c'était un grand ami.
Et vous assistiez aux représentations des films ?
Oui il les jouait, il était très mal vu par Senghor, il était un peu honni.
Parce qu'il critiquait…
Oui, Il critiquait beaucoup. J'ai vu Ceddo, j'ai vu La noire de… , j'ai vu Borom Sarret dans des villages. Oui on était ami.
Comment les films étaient perçus ?
Ben ne sait pas, les gens criaient, applaudissaient, mais on ne sait pas ce qu'ils retenaient, on ne sait pas. Mais ils avaient l'air d'aimer. Sembène en profitait pour faire un petit discours politique, oui.
J'ai découvert ses films aux Etats Unis, je regrette qu'ils ne soient pas plus discutés en France
Mais oui, ils étaient présentés dans des cinémas de seconde zone, jamais discutés
Maintenant on peut voir sur Youtube mais bon…Merci beaucoup.
FIN

INTERVIEW WITH MARYSE CONDE on August 5, 2017 at 3:00 PM
in the living room of her private home in Gordes, a little village in Vaucluse, France

Translation Sarena TIEN

The first question is about your familial ancestry, but I've read "Victoire, les saveurs et les mots" and "Le cœur à rire et à pleurer," so I know your mother's ancestry well, but what about your father's, especially at the level of your grandparents?

My father had a talent, which was inventing an ancestry. Sometimes he said his father was a sailor who did the Pointe-à-Pitre to Valparaiso route all year, sometimes he said his father was a trader, a trader from Grande-Terre. In fact, recently one of my friends researched my ancestry, and she discovered that my paternal family was from La Désirade. They were peasants, farmers who came from La Désirade but who went to settle in Petit-Bourg. So I believe that this version is more accurate than the sailor father, etc., I believe that my paternal family members were farmers of Désiradien origin.

They lived in Pointe-à-Pitre ?

They first lived in Petit-Bourg and then in Pointe-à-Pitre.

And what did his mother do?

I believe that she cleaned houses, but she passed away while he was playing soccer. She died in a fire in her hut during a slash-and-burn, upon which, I don't know how, he became a ward of the state, which was in theory reserved for children of military parents. He became a ward of the state, and he did all his studies with scholarships and grants from France.

And he reached what level?

Oh, rather far for the time, he was a primary school teacher. In Paris, he and some colleagues founded this little bank, "The Cooperative Loan Funds," of which he was secretary-general, I believe.

Just in comparison to your mother, whose father you describe in "Victoire, les saveurs et les mots." Did you find some small traces?

Well, "find" is saying a lot. I believe that I imagined a lot, yes, it was mostly imagination, approximation, deduction, but I have no proof.

You didn't really know Argellus.

A politician who was rather important in his day, who had Black partisans. Everything was based on skin color at the time, he was the champion, the hero of Black people.

He was in Marie-Galante?

Yes.

You talk about your brother Sandrino, who also wished to be a writer, in the book "rire et à pleurer."

Yes.

Was he a role model for you?

Uh! Not really, but because he had the same sickness as many Boucolons, a hereditary sickness, he could no longer write, so he dictated to me long pages of his books, which

had generally been refused by publishing houses. No, he wasn't really a role model, but I believe all the same that in a way, he gave me the appetite for writing. But because this taste was presented through him, I saw writing as an ideal that I could never reach. All his books were rejected.

Yes. For what reason?

Not good ones, not good ones, I believe, talkative, verbose, and I believe I started to write late to try to resolve this handicap. I didn't have a positive image of writing or of the writer, so I hesitated before throwing myself in, and I threw myself in with a sort of timidity.

Was the fact that you also were a woman a…?

No, because I was very arrogant. When I was young, convinced that I was intelligent, maybe the smartest woman in the world, I had no complex. My skin color didn't bother me, or not a lot at any rate, uh no, no, not at all.

And your brother, what made him want to be a writer?

I believe…no, I don't know.

In terms of reading, did he also…?

Yes, he made me read, he passed along authors whom he found interesting. He made me read all of Zobel's works. It's him who made me read. Without him, I never would've known Caribbean literature. When I was in high school, we only learned white French literature, but thanks to him I got a glimpse into the literature of our country.

And he also rubbed shoulders with writers of his time?

Yes, he spent time with a lot of Haitians, he was a good friend of Edris Saint-Amant, who wrote the beautiful novel *Bon Dieu rit*. Saint-Amant was his good friend.

He studied law?

Yes, law.

And in "La vie sans fard," you say that, for you, writing came as a necessity…

Well, I was scared of writing, I had no confidence in myself as a writer, and then one day I could no longer resist, I threw myself into it. But it wasn't a pleasant process, I had to make an effort, to dominate my fears without knowing how.

Was it more the publication or the writing itself?

Both.

Finally, the experience in Africa, you spent a lot of time with…it was a particular moment…

First of all, because of my political opinions, writing seemed a bit to me like a game of the bourgeois. Already. In order to write, it was necessary to do theater because there we had an immediate relationship, one that was more direct with whom we called "the people," or the masses, so it was necessary to vanquish all these prejudices before having the courage to write a novel.

Ah yes, because you thought that, through writing, you were distancing yourself from the masses or it was a way to have a…

Well, I think that writing diverts true militantism, we indulge ourselves, we dream, we imagine instead of fighting. I later understood that writing could be a form of fighting, but at the beginning, writing is a bit like a diversion.

And you saw other Négritude authors like A Césaire, Senghor?

Yes, not yet, I didn't know them.
It was after reading them?

After that, I understood that writing was a weapon. Césaire had a collection of poetry that he called *Les armes miraculeuses*. After, I understood, but at the beginning I was wary of my tendency, of my taste for writing.
And yes, and at the same time you were doing your literature studies.
Yes.
But at this time, you didn't see yourself becoming a writer?
Not at all.
But in Africa, you spent time with an intellectual milieu.
Yes, many Haitians who wrote, Roger Dorsainvil, Gérard C, yes, they were friends, like Jean Brière. Yes, but it was because they were writers, yes, it was simply because we had the same anticolonial vision. The writing came afterwards.
You returned to France to write your dissertation while also writing the novel "Hérémakhonon"?
Yes.
And you worked at Présence Africaine as a journalist?
Yes, afterwards, I believe that I wrote the dissertation first and then I went back to *Présence Africaine*.
Okay, because the first novel was in 1976…
Yes, *Hérémakhonon*.
There, I have a question that's a little specific. It was thanks to Stanislas Adotevi?
Yes, because I, I compared myself to Mariama Bâ. If one didn't have a friend who was in the publishing field, who encouraged us to write, to publish, I believe that one would never have had this audacity. Yes, Stan was the first to like what I was doing, and the first to encourage me to continue.
Okay, because he also directed a collected works, "La voix/voie des autres."
Yes, *La voix/voie des autres* at Éditions 10/18.
And in this 10/18 collected works, I was wondering what Adotevi's role was in the literary scene at the time?
Oh, it was Christian Bourgeois who dominated it, Stanislas was a little-known assistant. But even though there was no place for literature by non-French people, I believe that Stan was one of the pioneers.
But there was also another collected works, "Féminin Futur," in this same edition. But there were no links, you didn't have too many connections with this collected works?
No, no. No connection.
But Stanislas Adotevi, you had met him at Présence Africaine.
Ah yes certainly, surely at *Présence*.
I was also wondering why you didn't publish with Présence Africaine?
Because my book didn't have an appealing air, it was too critical, Mr. Diop didn't like my image of Africa. He didn't like at all everything that I was describing: poverty, misery, corruption, inequality, so *Présence* didn't want my book.
Ah. So you had tried several publishing houses?

Yes, I tried, knowing that they wouldn't want to. But that didn't stop us from remaining very good friends or me from continuing to work for them, but I knew that my literature didn't appeal to them.

So you differentiated well?

Ah yes, yes.

After, you say that the critiques were a little difficult.

Well, *Hérémakhonon* was hardly spoken about. I believe that the book was rather overlooked, yes, a few critiques here and there, but very few.

And that, how do you explain it?

Well, let's say that in 1976, Africa wasn't a paradise, the revolution had failed, when we look for happiness and we never find it, it's shocking.

It was shocking, yes. But you even said that Christian Bourgeois destroyed it.

Ah yes, it didn't sell, after a year Christian B destroyed it, all the unsold books were destroyed.

Ah yes, okay, because you had signed a contract?

Yes. I did a small lawsuit or I was going to threaten him with a lawsuit, and he paid me 5000 francs, I believe, to make peace. This was the practice at the time: if a book wasn't sold, it was destroyed.

In other words, they stopped promoting it?

Yes, and selling it, it's because of that that the book was republished afterwards with Robert Laffont.

And then you published "Une saison à Rihata" with Éditions Robert Laffont.

Yes.

There, it was through the intermediary Daniel Ratford, who was Guadeloupean…

Yes, he was Guadeloupean. We became friends, I don't know how. He said to me, "I want to publish your book." But the book wasn't successful, either. In fact, success came with *Ségou*, but before, it was total indifference.

Ah yes, okay. And Daniel Ratford, you had known him like that, in Paris…

Yes, I believe so. In Paris.

Robert Laffont, he was a great publisher?

Yes, but I no longer know how…

And there, you had also signed a contract, etc.…?

Yes.

But anyways, they didn't destroy…

No, the book wasn't successful, but the publishing house was large enough to tolerate a small failure, so they left me in peace. Yes.

And in fact, it was also Daniel Ratford who commissioned "Ségou"?

Yes, we discussed it a lot at Laffont, I had spoken about a project that I was coming up with, he was enthusiastic, and he commissioned it from me, one can say, he commissioned it from me but at my suggestion. I told him and I seduced him and he said to me, "Well, okay, go ahead." He made me a contract and I wrote *Ségou*.

Because it was in fact academic research that you were…

Yes, I was in the process of writing a thesis on the Mandinka, so a part of this thesis appeared in the book, in the novel.

Okay. If we stay in the same time period, you finished your thesis and you started to teach in Paris, in shifts.
Yes, at Paris 10, Paris 7, and Paris 12, yes, I intended to teach.
So I was wondering if you had only done shifts or if they had offered you a position…?
No, no position, that was out of the question, only shifts, but I earned a living via radio, by doing a lot of radio for RFI. I taught and that earned me nothing, I earned my life materially with radio.
And at RFI, you did cultural programs?
Yes, concerning Africa, author interviews, book reviews, etc.
Ah, so you must have met many people there…
Yes, many people, many, many.
Did you like radio work?
I liked it a lot, there was one side, we can say what we want, and we don't have to worry, we're protected by the anonymity of a studio.
Did you try to have a position in France?
Oh yes, I tried, but at the time it was impossible, impossible.
Because there was no department for Francophone literature…
Yes, there was. There was Madame Goré (inaudible), a center at Paris 3; Robert Jaulin directed an ethnology and literature center at Paris 7, yes there was, there was. One would have never thought to entrust a center to a Black person, woman or man, the racism at the time was such that one didn't even think about it. And us, we didn't even ask ourselves, we knew that we would be rejected, we didn't try. It was a strange time, there wasn't this (inaudible). At the time, Black militantism hardly existed.
For me, the US is where I discovered Caribbean literature.
Yes yes, yes, that's why we were invited to the US and why we left. At least they were interested in us. Paris had enjoyed *Ségou*, the book had been widely sold, but no one would have thought to study *Ségou* in a literature class.
Ah yes, yes. And I was wondering what pushed you to continue to work on a doctoral thesis and to continue an academic career alongside a writing one…
Yes, I had to earn a living, so the thesis imposed itself, yes, by necessity. It was necessary to live, I knew that literature wouldn't let me live, it was necessary to choose teaching, yes.
So, did you think about teaching in France, or not necessarily?
Yes, it was a dream.
But you still published two critical works at the end of the 70s, "La civilisation du Bossale" and "Parole des femmes."
Yes.
Was it difficult to find a publisher?
No, it was L'Harmattan, I believe, who was open to all Francophone writers, the first and only publishing house at the time to do so.
"Paroles de femmes" is rather unprecedented for the time. Did you know the female writers? Did you spend time with them, or not really?
Yes, I believe. I knew some, not all of them, but I forget which ones I knew. I knew the Haitians who came to France, to Paris. But that's all.

Marie Chauvet, you knew her?
Yes, we met in Paris, yes.
Simone Schwarz-Bart was, but the others weren't really successful, in the end?
No, no. It was a time where the woman's voice wasn't heard, especially that of the Black woman, there was no place for her. And us, we accepted this; bizarrely, we didn't try. For example, instead of fighting to be accepted in France, I left for New York, yes, avoidance, the choice of another destiny seemed inevitable.
Women had no place, and you had no connection with feminist movements?
None at all, none at all.
You left for the US to do a Fulbright in Los Angeles in 1984…
Just for one year.
And then you returned to Guadeloupe?
Yes.
Was it in Guadeloupe that you tried to teach?
Yes, I tried radio, university, culture in general by region. And I failed everywhere. I had no work, we stayed in Guadeloupe for more than two years. Richard worked, he had a job as a translator, as a translation professor, but me, I was completely out of work.
At the University of the Antilles and Guiana.
Yes.
(RICHARD): No, it was the continuing translation that depended on the English department of Martinique.
(Maryse): But yes, the University of the Antilles and Guiana.
And so you had to travel to Martinique?
No, there was a center at Pointe-à-Pitre.
Ah, okay, okay.
But we weren't too unhappy because I had made a lot of money with *Ségou*, so I remained unemployed.
But you wrote?
Yes, but what I wanted in order to make a living: radio, university.
You didn't have any side activities?
No, no side activities.
You still published three novels.
Which ones?
« Tituba, » « La vie scélérate, » et « Traversée de la Mangrove. »
Yes, yes, three novels on being Caribbean, what does it mean to be Caribbean?
That was with Mercure de France.
Because Madame Gallimard, whom I didn't know, had liked *Ségou* so much, she asked me to write a book for her publishing house, and I accepted.
Okay. You say that she asked you to write a book on a female figure from Guadeloupe?
Yes, hence the Caribbean region. I wanted Célia Cruz, then Aimé Césaire's wife, Suzanne Césaire, then I realized that that would work poorly, in the end I chose Tituba.
Who is excellent, I loved her.

I hesitated, but I chose, yes.
And* "*La vie scélérate*" *et* "*Traversée de la Mangrove*" *were also very good. And then you were invited to Berkeley?
Yes.
It's there that your career in the US started?
Yes.
When you were in Guadeloupe, did you have connections with female or male writers there?
No, not too many.
You were rather independent?
Yes, rather in a corner, yes.
And you did a little bit of political militantism?
I started, I started. I understood that writing is the best form of militantism. I started to write.
At that time, Richard was translating your books?
At first, they were translated by, I don't know anymore, Barbara Bray. Afterwards, Richard became my official translator.
And for the translations, it's the publisher who asks you?
It's the publisher who chooses, who does everything.
And for "Ségou"?
He had entrusted the translation to Barbara Bray, a translation that was bad, hopeless, we had to arrange everything, but afterwards, I began to have enough status to ask for my own translator, to impose my own translator.
And there, did you solicit publishing houses in the US?
No, that's done between publishing houses, between French and American publishing houses.
Ah, yes, because they have to buy the rights?
Of course.
Because they have to buy the rights. I understand. After, in the US, you taught at several universities before ending up at Columbia?
Yes.
Where you directed the Center for Francophone Studies?
Yes.
And there, how did your writing and critic jobs complement each other?
Well, the two complemented each other well, it was enjoyable to write, to critique others, to write, to see what others had done, yes, this went well together.
And this helped you in your practice of personal writing?
Yes, I believe so.
Did this also allow you to have a certain recognition…?
Yes, I believe, I taught in America, I was translated by my husband Richard, so a whole set of converging lines allowed me to reach a certain public.
For example, in relation to the movement on Créolité, you were able to organize a colloquium.
Against.
A colloquium to express…?

Yes, with Madeleine Hage, who was a friend who taught with me, we organized a colloquium to say what we thought of Créolité.

Did you have direct contact with the writers?

Yes, with Chamoiseau, Confiant, we were in contact, Glissant, too.

Glissant was also a professor…

Glissant and I, we were never great friends, but we respected each other, we saw each other, we spent time with each other, we were polite, yes, he wasn't a friend, but he wasn't an enemy, either.

And when you started to teach in the US, Francophone literature was starting to be taught, at first you were a little…

Only Césaire was well-known, but us, we started to work to make other writers known, who were as good as Césaire but who weren't well-known at all.

Such as?

Zobel, Vincent Bracoli…yes, this whole generation.

And there, did being a woman in American academia help you, or not really?

No, no impact, no.

So, you continued to publish novels at the same time?

Yes.

So once you had your publishers, it was easy to propose…

Of course, I had a contract, I proposed one every year, every two years, it was easy.

In terms of critical reception, you thought it was more important…

I believe that the US pays more attention to our books than France. I'm a bit surprised, things are changing. My last book, which was published in May 2017, won honors from *Nouvel Observateur*, *Monde*, *Point, Journal Dimanche*, but this is a totally new phenomenon. Before, when I started to write 20 or 30 years ago, if we had an article in a major newspaper, we could think that we were happy. That's changing.

You see an evolution?

Yes, all the same.

But do you think that it's because your most recent novel treats a current, topical fact?

Yes, but I think that when *Hérémakhonon* was published, it talked about a current problem, but no one wanted to hear our voices, our opinions didn't count.

Yes, okay. But on the other hand, 10 years later, there were still articles written about it, but within American academia.

Yes, but afterwards, afterwards.

And each time that a book is translated into English, you also get royalties?

Richard's the one who does it. For me, a book in English isn't a book that belongs to me. It's him who's interested by that, who watches that.

For example, you say that "Ségou" became a bit of a classic in the US.

Yes, I know it's studied a lot in universities, even in high schools.

(Richard): It became a Penguin Classics. It was released as a Livre de Poche.

Ah yes, okay. And the prizes?

Unfortunately, I only won secondary prizes: the Prix Tropiques, the Marguerite Yourcenar Prize, the Grand Prix Littéraire de la Femme, and the Grand Prix du Roman Métis. I've never had a real major literary prize and Daniel (??), in a recent article,

gave his reason, which is maybe a good one. It says I speak too frankly, too openly, I criticize a bit too openly, maybe he's right. This wasn't appealing, I don't know…[3]

After the autobiographical narratives, "Le cœur à rire et à pleure" in 2001, then "Victoire des saveurs et des mots" in 2006, and then most recently, "La vie sans fard " and "Mets et merveilles," did you have a reception that was a little more important, or not really?

Always, I always had a rather good reception, but above all, *La vie sans fard* went well, *Mets et merveilles*, I don't believe so. Yes, an interested reception. Yes.

What pushed you to write autobiographical narratives?

I wanted to talk about myself, to put an end to misunderstandings, falsehoods, simplifications, to present myself as I am, as I want people to know me.

Yes. In your first novels, there were always debates between fiction and reality…

But yes, yes.

Your connections with the media?

Well, that depends, I had all the media recently, they even came here to Gordes, yes. *Le Nouvel Observateur* came to Gordes, it's a little recent, a little new, yes.

How do you explain this interest?

I believe now that I've reached an age where I'm a bit of a phenomenon, a sort of, yes, strangeness, "she still writes, she's always writing. It's a bit like that.

After New York, you returned to Guadeloupe, then Paris. Being in Paris, it was no longer easy?

Yes. I returned because I was sick.

For health reasons.

Yes, for health reasons, no, it changed nothing, no.

And in Guadeloupe?

Unknown, ignored.

But do you think that's maybe changing?

Yes, a little, a little, but largely ignored, yes, it's changing but that's normal, "No one is ever a prophet in their own country."

You returned there recently…

I was there two years ago, yes. Now they make a little bit of effort, they invited me for Memorial ACTe. But to say that they really read me, that they really know me, "no."

It's not easy. Did you continue political work, or not at all?

Not at all, now I try to think about my health, which is very bad.

But I think that in your last novel, you still had the courage to write about a very political and topical subject.

Yes, yes, and modern.

Not many other writers have taken on the subject yet.

The publisher wanted me to remove everything related to terrorism, I refused, I said, "You might as well publish another book, or you take it like this or you leave it," he took it like that. At first, no, he was scared, I believe.

Finally, do you have royalties from the sales, or not too many?

Not yet, it's too early.

Are you continuing other projects?

[3] Meanwhile, she received the « Alternative » Nobel Prize for literature in 2018.

No, now I've finished writing a children's book, because it's difficult for me not to write, but I think that it's time to stop.

Because you dictated your last book, that's it…?

Dictated to Richard, to a friend, Régine, so it was a little difficult, even very difficult.

Because it's different, no?

Well, the relationship of intimacy that one has with their text was broken, but we managed somehow, we got there all the same.

And I had questions about your family, you had four children, what do your daughters do?

One is an economist in Haiti. One is a lawyer, and the third works in an insurance company, AXA.

Ah so there's one who lives in Haiti…

Yes, for two years. The other two are in Paris.

And you have how many grandchildren?

5, I believe, and 2 great-grandchildren.

And you say that you started to write once your children were older…

Yes.

And have they read your works?

Not many. For example, one, the eldest, Sylvia, read the last book, but the two others, I don't believe so, they are in the process of reading it, but since then, they started it but they haven't finished it, no. It's not there that I have my fans, no.

It's going to be translated in English?

I don't know, it just came out. It's a little early.

You also wrote plays.

Yes, at first, and afterwards one was commissioned by an actor whom I liked a lot, Gilbert Lemort, and the other was commissioned by a girl who wanted an adaptation of one of my novels.[4] But otherwise, I wrote very little theater.

Do you consider yourself as a French, Guadeloupean, or "Francophone" writer?

Guadeloupean, I believe.

Or as a writer of world literature?

Yes, yes yes.

And how do you see the future of literature in Guadeloupe, Martinique?

Er, I don't know, who writes now? Who's assuring the succession? I don't know. I don't see the future at all.

Do you have contact with the female writers?

With Fabienne Kanor, who is Martinican, a little with Simone Schwarz-Bart when I go to Guadeloupe, very little, a little with Pineau, but it's not essential, no.

And with Haiti?

Yes, with Yanick Lahens, Evelyne Trouillot. But they're more friends than literary contacts, they're friends, we talk a little about everything.

What advice would you give to someone who wants to become a writer?

None. "Go for it, throw yourself into the water, do what you believe, and *above all,* don't listen to advice."

Were there any books that were refused for publication?

[4] Eve Doumbia staged the autobiographical narrative *La vie sans fard* and extracts from *Ségou*.

No, no, when I saw that a text wasn't pleasing, as is the case with *Les belles ténébreuses*, I changed publishers.

"La vie scélérate," you published it with Seghers in 87?

Yes, but it's Laffont, it's the same publishing house. Laffont-Seghers, it's a merger.

Okay. And in Paris there is Lattès, too. How did you know them? More autobiographical stories than other places.

Because Laurent Laffont left to found a publishing house with his sister Lattès. And when I had problems with Laffont, I returned to Laurent, he's an old friend whom I knew for a long time.

So you no longer publish with Laffont?

No, because I don't know why…Because I didn't sell enough, I believe, but no, I left for Lattès.

Being in the US, but in New York, it was something…?

I liked it, I adored New York, I adored Columbia, I adored my students, I loved working with them, it was a privileged moment.

I think that, in the US, it's incredible…

Well yes, the relationship that one establishes with their subject and with the students is unique, unique.

Do you still have connections?

Yes, many, many, even my students come to see me in Gordes. (inaudibly) Kaiama Glover, Kavita Singh.

Yes, I knew her [Singh] at Cornell.

She came to see us in Paris with her husband who's a writer, a Spanish writer. We have a very good relationship.

Do you think that, in France, things will change when it comes to…?

It's in the process of changing a little, I read an article in *Le Monde* about Eva Doumbia, a young female theater director of Ivorian ancestry.

And you think that Francophone literature from Africa and the Caribbean is going to be taught more?

Maybe, I don't know, I can't say, maybe.

Eva Doumbia, it was her who did a theatrical performance of…

Ségou and *La vie sans fard* in Marseille's La Criée theater.

And this was successful?

I believe so, the hall was packed.

Ah yes. And when you were in Senegal, you knew Sembène Ousmane.

Yes, he was a good friend.

And you attended film screenings?

Yes, he showed them, he was very poorly regarded by Senghor, he was a little contempuous.

Because he criticized…

Yes, he criticized a lot. I saw *Ceddo*, I saw *La noire de…,* I saw *Borom Sarret* in villages. Yes, we were friends.

How were the films perceived?

Er, I don’t know, people yelled, clapped, but we don’t know what they retained, we don’t know. But they seemed to like the films. Sembène took advantage of this to make a little political speech, yes.
I discovered his films in the US, I regret that they’re no longer discussed in France.
But yes, they were played in second-class cinemas, never discussed.
Now, we can see them on Youtube, but anyways...Thank you very much.
END

APPENDICE 2: Interview with Simone Schwarz-Bart

Entretien avec SIMONE Schwarz-Bart
Paris le 21 juillet 2017, en terrasse d'un café du 13ème arrondissement

Si vous pouviez me parler un peu de vos origines familiales, vos grands parents, vos parents...

Oui je suis née en l'année 1938. Je suis revenue aux Antilles à l'âge de 3 mois avec ma mère qui était institutrice. Et mon père qui était militaire est resté, est demeuré en Europe parce qu'il était… il avait sa carrière et il y avait la guerre, à ce moment-là il fallait que nous nous séparions. Donc ma mère était institutrice de campagne. A cette époque-là quand on embrassait la carrière d'instituteur, c'était vraiment une vraie vocation parce que les enfants arrivaient en classe très tardivement, parce que les parents en avaient besoin. Ils les gardaient pour les aider à faire du charbon, à faire du jardinage, toutes sortes de travaux et même pour aider à garder les autres frères et sœurs. Donc les enfants avaient une tâche, et ils avaient à accomplir cette tâche avant d'aller à l'école. Si bien que quand ils arrivaient en classe, il y avait des enfants de 10, 11 ans. Et donc ma mère était quelqu'un qui faisait toutes les sections, depuis le CP jusqu'à l'entrée en 6 ème, jusqu'au certificat d'études donc toutes les classes étaient en une, surveiller les tous petits. Il y avait une entraide, une espèce d'émulation et les enfants sentaient bien que c'était très important pour eux d'étudier, d'apprendre pour justement ne pas avoir à aller au champ comme leurs parents, ne pas avoir à aller à la canne, ou à la banane ou à la vanille, ou au cacao parce qu'en ce temps-là toujours on pratiquait la polyculture. C'était pas du tout la monoculture avec seulement des champs de canne ou des bananeraies. Il y avait beaucoup de diversité. Il y avait des champs de cacao, des champs de caféiers et d'ailleurs le café de Guadeloupe servait à bonifier les autres cafés tellement il était excellent. Et quand on l'envoyait en métropole ce café servait souvent d'exhausteur, voilà. Et il y avait également beaucoup de personnes qui cultivaient la vanille. Donc, c'est une culture qui demande beaucoup de soin parce qu'il faut la féconder à la main, donc il y avait tout cela. Il y avait ces bonifieries de café justement après la récolte elle-même du café...ça donnait lieu aussi à des rassemblements, à des rencontres de personnes, à du partage aussi des tâches aussi ensemble. Il y en avait qui lavaient le café, les autres l'étendaient à sécher. Il y avait vraiment beaucoup, beaucoup, de travail collectif et de chants collectifs à ces travaux. Dans les cacaoyères quand les femmes cueillaient les cabosses de cacao, eh bien tout le monde chantait. C'était une grande fête…

Et votre mère ?

Donc ma mère à cette époque-là, elle recevait tous ces enfants et elle s'arrangeait …presque tous ces enfants arrivaient et réussissaient, elle les faisait rattraper. Alors là, moi comme je suivais un cursus normal sans avoir besoin de rattraper quoique ce soit, j'étais souvent… elle s'occupait beaucoup plus intensément pendant la journée de ses élèves qu'elle devait former que de moi-même qui… J'étais donc dans la cour, et c'est là aussi que j'ai beaucoup parlé créole avec mes petites compagnes de cours, on s'en allait, on allait dans les cimetières, on allait visiter ; il y avait juste un cimetière derrière l'école , c'est là que se tenaient nos petites réunions dans le cimetière avec tous les os qui étaient là qui étaient sortis avec la pluie et le ravinement des eaux ,euh voilà…

C'était dans quel village ?
C'était dans le village de trois rivières dans la section de Schoelsher
D'accord, pas très loin de Goyave…
Voilà, depuis Goyave en allant vers Basse Terre, il faut d'abord passer par Bananier, par Capesterre , et ensuite
Votre mère ses parents étaient de ce coin ?
Non, non. Ma mère était orpheline. Ma mère était une enfant orpheline qui avait perdu ses deux parents, et elle était en pension chez une dame qui avait déjà je crois 7 ou 8 enfants et qui la gardait. Donc voilà, elle savait, ma grand-mère était elle-même institutrice ; et avant de mourir elle a laissé une lettre à ma mère où elle lui disait qu'elle la laissait, qu'elle était seule au monde, et que seule son instruction lui permettrait de gagner facilement et honnêtement sa vie. Donc ma mère avait toujours la lettre, la lettre de sa mère dans sa poche ; elle avait toujours une petite robe à poche et elle gardait cette lettre parce que les autres enfants de cette dame, c'était une famille aisée, ils n'avaient donc pas besoin de travailler alors que ma mère elle allait au réverbère pour apprendre ses leçons. Elle allait au réverbère du carrefour puisque, vous savez à cette époque-là c'était l'époque des lampes à pétrole, et il fallait toujours faire des économies sur le pétrole. A un moment donné on éteignait, il y avait extinction des feux. Alors si on voulait de nouveau lire ou apprendre, il fallait aller au réverbère, et puis voilà…
Donc sa mère avait été une des premières institutrices …
Tout à fait, je ne l'ai pas connue, elle faisait parties de ces femmes qui étaient complétement dévoués à leurs tâches, à leurs tâches de passeuses de savoirs. Il y avait les chansons également. Les chansons, je vous donne les paroles de ces chansons, l'air… on était en rang dans la cour et avant d'entrer, on nous mettait en état de recevoir dignement l'instruction qu'on allait nous donner et là on chantait : « travaillons pour nous instruire, pour comprendre et pour aimer. Quand les couples seront lire, ils cesseront de s'égorger. Sous les cieux remplis d'étoiles, resplendira la beauté. Nous irons à pleine voiles sur les bancs de la Fraternité ». Vous voyez le programme ; le programme était lancé mais ce n'était pas quelque chose de vain. Ce n'était pas gratuit, il fallait nous pénétrer des paroles que nous prononcions, et il fallait nous mettre en état de les réaliser. Donc, les professeurs ne nous faisaient pas chanter n'importe quoi. C'était des chants qui vantaient aussi donc le savoir, et justement ils étaient peut-être naïfs en nous proposant ce programme mais c'était un programme qui pour cette génération-là était … on y croyait vraiment, on croyait vraiment à l'instruction ; on croyait vraiment aux lumières et on pensait que vraiment c'était la clef d'une meilleure humanité. Donc c'était très important ces chants et ces morales, parce qu'il y avait la leçon de morale et l'explication. La maîtresse ne se contentait pas… Il y avait la phrase à commenter tous les jours et qui était au tableau noir et que l'on commentait. Elle, elle commentait la phrase et ensuite elle demandait à chaque élève son sentiment, comment est-ce qu'il avait reçu cette phrase, comment cela se passait, ce qu'il voyait…parce que en même temps ça formait des êtres humains, et ça ne formait pas non plus que des têtes pleines de savoir, ça formait aussi un esprit capable aussi d'analyser.
D'accord. Et, votre Grand-mère venait de la même région ?
Je ne sais pas de quel endroit ma grand-mère venait… Ma grand-mère maternelle donc
Et pour être institutrice il fallait aller jusqu'au certificat d'études ?

Ah non plus, vous avez le Brevet élémentaire, et quand on avait le Brevet élémentaire, c'était beaucoup plus que le Bac actuel, oui donc c'était un savoir aussi.

Et vous vous avez continué après le lycée ?

Moi, je suis venue passer mon Bac ici. Ma dernière année ma mère a voulu me faire changer d'air, parce qu'en fait, il faut vous dire que « La France » c'était comme la Mecque. Il fallait aller en France et si possible si on avait passé son diplôme en France, on avait connu autre chose, on s'était ouvert l'esprit, parce que la France c'était le pays où les jeunes étaient beaux, bons, magnifiques, où devait régner la justice sur la Terre, où vraiment il y avait un accueil de l'étranger particulièrement fraternel parce qu'il y avait eu la Révolution, enfin tout ce qu'on sait… toutes ces belles choses qui étaient censées découler de l'histoire de France et qui faisait de la France le pays où Jésus Christ lui-même était descendu, voilà (rire). Donc bon, vous comprenez que quand on arrivait, et qu'on se voyait refuser déjà les locations d'appartements, les locations … on se voyait cantonnés dans des hôtels entassés les uns sur les autres ecteri etcétéra bref on commençait à voir que bon ma fois, la France ne faisait pas exception à la règle qui voulait que les humains soient euh voilà….

Donc l'accueil n'était pas aussi … fraternel que ça…

Oui parce que, avant quand les gens de métropole arrivaient aux Antilles, ils étaient reçus comme des Dieux, ils étaient reçus exactement comme quand Christophe Colomb a débarqué chez les Indiens, et que les Indiens se demandaient si ce n'était pas des Dieux qui venaient les visiter, alors que Christophe Colomb se proposait déjà de les exterminer. Et, et, bon…je n'irais pas jusque-là, mais je veux dire que c'était deux états complétement différents. Et que quand nous accueillons toutes ces personnes comme cela, nous étions persuadés que nous aussi, nous allions être accueillis de même. On considérait effectivement que c'était nos ancêtres les Gaulois. C'est après quand nous sommes venus ici, alors on a contesté l'appartenance aux Gaulois. Mais autrement on l'acceptait de bon cœur et l'histoire de France on la connaissait sur le bout des doigts. On connaissait tout. C'était notre histoire, c'était nous quoi, et on pardonnait aux gaulois d'être blonds et d'avoir des yeux bleus, (rire) on leur pardonnait (rire) mais oui ! Et tant pis ma foi ! Mais voilà, quand on arrivait ici, on savait ce que cela voulait dire tout cela. Et quand on demandait si la Guadeloupe était près de Madagascar, ou alors si la Guadeloupe était vers les Comores ou j'en passe… « Est-ce possible, ils ne nous connaissent donc pas ? » « Oh mon Dieu !» « Comment est-ce possible, nous leurs enfants ? » Et alors là commençait la remontée du courant.

Finalement c'est en venant ici que…

C'est en venant ici oui, c'est en venant ici qu'il y a eu le questionnement. Parce que même là-bas, quand on vous appelle, quand on vous disait « vieux nègre » cela veut dire que vous êtes une personne, une mauvaise personne, nègre cela veut dire personne pour nous, cela voulait dire « personne ». Mais ici nègre, c'est nègre cela a une autre connotation, et on le sent quand la personne que vous avez en face de vous vous le dit. Donc c'est là que vous vous rendez compte que « eh oui, ah c'est vrai quelle horreur ! quelle horreur ! » C'est pourquoi des enfants antillais qui naissaient ici, et qui allaient à l'école ici demandaient à leurs parents : « Mais pourquoi on n'est pas blanc ? Pourquoi on est noir ? » Il y avait tout un questionnement, parce que la communauté antillaise à cette époque-là ne faisait pas le travail. Ils ne pouvaient pas faire le travail parce que

pour eux il n'y avait pas lieu de le faire puisque nous étions des enfants de France. Nous étions des enfants de France, nous avions l'hiver, j'ai appris tous les poèmes sur… moi, je rêvais de la neige, je ne rêvais pas de mangues, je rêvais de la neige, c'était cela qu'on apprenait. Et quelquefois je faisais aussi des cauchemars que j'étais dans la neige, que la neige tombait, que la neige tombait, de plus en plus haut, de plus en plus haut et m'ensevelissait et voilà je faisais des cauchemars de neige.

Ici ou en Guadeloupe…

En Guadeloupe, oui j'étais, en même temps on surfait sur deux tableaux : on surfait sur ce tableau français. Mais on savait quand même que cela n'était pas tout à fait …comment dire… on était les enfants illégitimes du Bon Dieu. Voilà on était des illégitimes, on était des illégitimes. Voilà, on savait qu'on n'était pas des héritiers, les héritiers, les héritiers c'étaient les Békés, c'étaient les blancs, parce que nous. Par exemple à l'Eglise, peut-être on vous l'a dit également… à l'Eglise il y avait les premiers bancs qui étaient réservés, avec les noms de ces familles, et nous on devait aller à l'arrière. Par exemple, quand il y avait des cérémonies de couronnement de la Vierge, parce que le mois de mai c'est le mois de la Vierge. Et tous les après-midis on va, on chante, on fait des chapelets à la Vierge, « je vous salue, je vous salue Marie. » et au mois de Mai il y a le couronnement de la Vierge, et chaque fois il n'y a jamais eu une petite fille de couleur qui a eu, comment dirai-je, qui a eu la grâce ou le grand honneur de promener la Vierge, on n'était pas digne. Nos mains étaient des mains sales, nous étions des personnes à péchés. Nous étions des « sacs à péchés. » Donc, voilà forcément, ça on savait, c'était le prêtre, c'est le prêtre même qui nous inculquait ça également, de sorte que

Par la religion ?

Par la religion, on savait qu'elle était notre place

Et grâce au Christ on pouvait être sauvés ? Ici il n'y avait pas rémission des péchés ?

Oui il y avait, le Christ pardonne à tous, mais nous notre âme était plus noire que celle des autres. De toute façon on est des coupables, on est des coupables, coupables de quoi ? je n'en sais rien. Je n'en sais rien. En tous les cas on le savait, puisque, il y avait St Michel, il y avait une grande dévotion à St Michel, St Michel qui terrasse le démon, qui terrasse Satan qui est une personne noire ; St Michel est beau, blond avec son épée, et il y a le démon noir, comment …comment… ne pas...

S'identifier

Oui s'identifier, comment ne pas s'identifier, alors que chaque fois on nous traitait de Satan, on nous traitait de démon, on nous traitait de tout cela…on faisait un amalgame et voilà

Donc quand vous arrivez ici c'était une expérience assez difficile ? Vous aviez 16 ans, c'est ça ?

Oui mais en même temps, j'avais une âme légère. J'avais une âme légère, c'est-à-dire que comme ma mère me disait toujours : « nous, on a été formés dans les usines à sucre et nous sommes devenus des usines nous-mêmes. Et nous sommes des usines parce que c'est nous qui nous fabriquons ; nous nous faisons ; c'est toi qui dois te faire et c'est toi qui dois aussi pardonner et leur pardonner. Ma mère était du principe : « à tout péché miséricorde ». S'ils te traitent de négresse, vole au-dessus de tout ça, parce que « ma fille tu sais qui tu es, personne ne peut t'apprendre qui tu es. Laisse les gens dire ceci,

cela. Toi tu sais qui tu es et tu connais ta valeur, contente-toi de ça et ne réponds pas. C'est inutile de répondre aux personnes qui ne veulent pas entendre. Déjà s'ils te disent ça c'est qu'ils ne veulent pas t'entendre, ils ne veulent pas te voir, ils ne veulent pas t'écouter. Déjà si tu commences à discuter leurs appréciations c'est que tu tiens compte de leur appréciation, c'est que tu leur donnes une valeur, alors qu'ils n'en ont pas, alors arrêtes ça. Et vole, vole, vole. Trouve le moyen d'avoir des ailes, ne prends pas ça sur ton cœur. Et accomplis ta destinée. » Donc ma maman a toujours été une personne très libre aussi parce qu'elle a dû passer toute la guerre sans mon père, toute seule à combattre, à voir aussi la misère des gens. C'était une personne compatissante. Comme elle avait un revenu mensuel par rapport à sa fonction d'institutrice, elle prêtait de l'argent à tout le monde, les gens qui voulaient ouvrir un petit négoce, les gens qui voulaient marier leur enfant et qui n'avaient pas, et qui voulaient ne pas être dans l'humiliation, et ci et ça. Et ben maman a toujours été comme ça. J'étais enfant unique pourtant mais quand je lui demandais : « j'aimerais bien une nouvelle robe », elle me disait : « toi tu as 3 robes et tu sais qu'il y a ta petite copine elle en a qu'une, que sa maman lave, fait sécher le jeudi pour lui remettre le vendredi matin pour qu'elle soit propre. Alors avant de te donner une 4 ème robe, je vais peut-être en donner une autre à la petite fille qui n'en a qu'une. Qu'est-ce que tu penses de ça ? » Alors je disais « mais oui. C'est normal. » Et donc il n'y avait pas de désir d'empiler chez ma mère, d'empiler des richesses, de ci de ça, pas du tout, non, non non, elle allait à l'essentiel. Et ainsi j'ai été élevée dans l'austérité mais je n'en ai absolument pas souffert, je ne la ressentais pas d'ailleurs. C'est maintenant que je vois que j'étais dans l'austérité mais pour moi je ne l'ai pas vécu comme tel, car tout le monde était dans l'austérité, donc voilà. Par contre, ma vraie vie, mon vrai moment de bonheur total c'était la fin des cours, la fin des classes et que nous partions chez ma grand-mère et mon grand-père paternels

Donc eux ils étaient aussi de Guadeloupe ?

Oui, ils étaient de Guadeloupe, et ils habitaient Goyave, c'est par eux que nous sommes venus à Goyave, donc à Goyave j'ai tous mes fantômes hein, j'ai mes grands-parents, j'ai mes parents, j'ai mon mari, tout le monde, donc Goyave pour moi c'est un lieu chargé. Mais quand je suis à cet endroit, je sens que je suis à ma place, je sens que je suis avec tous les miens. Mon grand- père et ma grand-mère paternels c'est encore une autre affaire parce que ma grand-mère était une St Martinoise, donc ma grand-mère parlait elle anglais et créole et mon grand-père était un Bordelais, c'était un blanc de Bordeaux aux yeux bleus, qui était négociant en vin, et qui n'a jamais négocier le vin contre le rhum (rire). Pour lui, le vin c'était comme s'il recevait tous les jours l'hostie, quand il prenait tous les jours son verre de Saint Emilion, il regardait l'ârome de son vin, il chantait pour son vin, il avait sa chanson de vigne ou de vin. Il était incroyablement seul à Goyaves dans un endroit aussi perdu.

Alors comment il a atterri à Goyave ?

Il a atterri à Goyave parce que ma grand-mère, ma grand-mère comme je vous ai dit qu'elle était de l'île St Martin elle était très pauvre, c'était une île qui était extrêmement pauvre à l'époque, donc elle a quitté St Martin pour venir se louer en Guadeloupe. Et elle est venue, elle est rentrée au service de mon grand-père voilà, et mon grand-père à ce moment-là, ma grand-mère a été complétement euh, comment dirais-je, fasciné par cette personne silencieuse, mystérieuse. Ma grand-mère avait des connections avec les

arbres, avec les éléments. C'était une personne extrêmement mystique et solitaire, donc elle avait une espèce de présence silencieuse et rayonnante, et voilà …Par exemple c'était la personne qui vous disait : « voilà, les feuilles du manguier sont tombées d'un coup à 4 h de l'après-midi, il va y avoir un décès, je suis sûre qu'il y a une âme qui est partie, le manguier m'a prévenue. » Vous voyez, donc c'était le type de personne comme ça. Et mon grand-père il s'est épris de cette femme, et il l'a épousée. A ce moment-là tous les békés, les blancs se sont ligués et l'ont ruiné, donc il a été ruiné, il était négociant en vin.

Il était venu faire du commerce de vin en Guadeloupe ?

Je crois que son père était déjà en Guadeloupe, et lui il a pris la succession.

Donc il a été ruiné…

Donc on ne lui a rien acheté enfin bref. De toute façon comme d'habitude il n'y avait pas de place, pour les couples mixtes il n'y a pas de place, surtout dans ces époques. La communauté noire disait à ma grand-mère qu'elle se croyait une reine pour avoir épousé un blanc, qu'est-ce qu'elle se croyait, pour qui elle se prenait. Elle ne voyait donc pas qu'elle était une vieille petite négresse qui ne savait même pas lire et écrire. Et est-ce qu'elle croyait que le Blanc était capable de voir sa beauté, et etc. allons y gaiement. Et les Blancs de leur côté : « Qu'est-ce qu'il a à se fourvoyer avec une négresse, qu'est-ce qu'elle a celle-là, qu'est-ce qu'elle a de plus que toutes ces petites négresses marrons qu'on peut avoir à tous moments. » Voilà

Pourquoi l'épouser ?

Pourquoi l'épouser, pourquoi ? Alors ceci étant ils ont acheté un petit îlet, en face de la rade de Pointe à Pitre, et ils se sont soustraits à la bêtise des deux communautés et ils ont vécu comme Robinson sur son île. Voilà ils ont eu 6 enfants sur cette île-là, donc mon père, mes oncles et tantes. Et au Cyclone de 1928 ils ont été complétement ruinés : leur maison rasée, les animaux parce que ma grand-mère savait beaucoup s'occuper des animaux, elle avait des vaches, elle les trayait, elle faisait du beurre. A cette époque-là c'était toute une affaire pour avoir du beurre de Métropole. Mais elle de St Martin il y avait beaucoup de bêtes à St Martin, beaucoup de bétail, alors elle savait, elle savait comment barater, je ne sais pas quoi, voilà elle connaissait, elle faisait du beurre, du fromage, et elle envoyait mon grand-père vendre tout ça aux blancs qui étaient friands de tout cela. Ben voilà, puisqu'ils ne voulaient pas qu'il continue dans son négoce de vin. Mais après ils ont été ruinés, après le cyclone. Les bêtes sont mortes, ils ont tout perdu. Alors ils ont regagné une petite maison qu'ils avaient à Goyave, où ils allaient en changement d'air. Puisqu'ils étaient toute l'année à la mer et pendant les vacances ils emmenaient leurs enfants respirer l'air de la montagne à Goyave. Et c'est comme ça qu'ils se sont retrouvés à Goyave et que ma mère pendant les vacances scolaires allait voir ses beaux-parents puisque mon père n'était pas là. Au moins cela lui servait de famille. C'est une époque où Goyave n'était pas Goyave, tout ce que je raconte dans Télumée, je ne sais si vous avez lu ?

Oui oui bien sûr

Tout ce que je raconte se passe à Goyave. Tous les gens, Télumée, les sœurs de Télumée, toutes les personnes, j'ai les photos d'ailleurs de toutes ces personnes, il faut savoir que bon voilà c'était justement c'était complétement un lieu perdu , alors il fallait que …. Mon grand-père blanc, bordelais, envoyait des amis qui avaient une charrette avec des

bœufs et tout cela qui venaient nous rencontrer aux 3 chemins ma mère et moi. On prenait le car, on arrivait sur la route coloniale parce que c'était la route coloniale à l'époque, et de la route coloniale à Goyave, la route était vraiment en terre de glaise, et on montait comme ça avec ces bœufs.

C'était les vacances …

Oui c'était les vacances et c'était en même temps les plus belles périodes de ma vie. Je voyais ce couple devant moi qui n'avait rien à faire ensemble, mon grand-père et ma grand-mère et qui étaient des personnes que j'ai connues en couple les plus heureuses de la Terre. Tous les jours mon grand-père disait à ma grand – mère : « Marie je t'aime. » en français, en créole et en anglais. Tous les jours, il avait toujours quelque chose pour elle, tous les jours elle avait un petit plat à faire pour son mari. C'était des gens qui se sont aimés peut-être parce qu'ils étaient à l'abri des gens parce qu'ils étaient dans cet endroit perdu. C'est quelque fois très difficile en couple. Mais pour eux je crois que pour eux cela a été une bénédiction.

Donc vous avez passé le Bac ici

Oui j'ai passé le Bac ici, et puis après justement comme je suis une « bordelique » fini , j'ai un désordre c'est pas possible, et donc j'ai perdu ma convocation au Bac et voilà.

Vous étiez où quel lycée?

Moi je crois que j'étais au Lycée Jules Ferry, je crois dans le 18 ème. J'étais au lycée près de la Place Clichy

Et vous viviez avec qui ?

Avec ma maman, ma mère est venue avec moi, on vivait toutes les deux.

Alors elle avait fini son poste ?

Oui, oui elle était à la retraite, et elle est venue avec moi, soit elle était à la retraite, soit elle avait pris une année pour me faire m'habituer à la métropole avec moi, avec elle, pour chercher avec moi, pour voir comment sa fille, comment je me sentais, est-ce que je restais, est-ce que je voulais repartir. Voilà donc on était dans le 18 ème

Pour votre mère c'était la première fois ?

Non non

Parce que votre père après la guerre ?

Mon père lui il était, on était déjà rentré en France avec mon père. On avait été à Marseille, j'avais peut-être 9 ans, j'avais peut-être 8 9 ans peut-être 6 ans quand mon père est revenu de la guerre. Après il a été affecté au Maroc, mon père militaire, c'était lui le chef militaire qui avait lieu au Maroc . Nous sommes rentrés au Maroc avec mon père, c'est à Casablanca que j'ai fait ma première communion, donc on est passé par Marseille, voilà. Mais là je n'ai pas tellement de souvenirs…

Et lui il a fini sa carrière militaire au Maroc ?

Non non après on est revenu parce que c'était la guerre au Vietnam, il est rentré, il a demandé d'être en retraite avant …

Anticipée

Anticipée, en retraite anticipée qu'on a accepté, étant donné ses années de services, à la guerre partout… Il avait aussi été lui-même au Vietnam déjà, bref, je sais qu'il a fait le Congo, je sais qu'il a fait le Liban, il a été …

Toutes les guerres de décolonisation

Oui oui. Mais bon il ne voulait plus, il en avait assez... Et c'est comme cela qu'il a acheté cette propriété de Goyave, pour se retirer du monde aussi, de tout, et être dans ses racines en même temps, voilà

Donc vous êtes restée avec votre mère au lycée et après vous avez continué ?

Comme j'ai perdu ma convocation, j'allais dans un bureau qu'on m'avait indiqué pour en demander une autre et c'est comme cela que j'ai rencontré André, voilà comme Je m'étais perdu il a été avec moi pour faire les démarches, reprendre ma convocation, et c'est comme cela que cela a commencé.

Vous avez réussi le Bac ?

Oui bien sûr, oui

Et après est ce que vous avez fait des études universitaires ?

Après j'ai été à l'Université, j'ai été à Assas, je faisais du droit, j'ai fait une année de Droit, mais c'était catastrophique, ce n'était pas pour moi, non je n'ai pas apprécié, ce n'était pas ma vocation, je n'ai pas aimé du tout. J'ai juste aimé certaines copines, certaines camarades que j'ai rencontrées, avec qui je me suis liée d'amitié et autrement cela n'a pas duré très longtemps. Après cette année de Fac, André et moi on s'est marié, et on est parti à Dakar.

Parce que lui quand vous l'avez rencontrée, c'était la publication du Derniers des Justes. Il avait déposé son manuscrit.

Oui il venait de déposer son manuscrit. Moi je ne savais pas du tout… je n'étais pas de ce monde littéraire. Je ne savais pas ce qu'était le Prix Goncourt, je ne savais pas qui avait eu déjà un Prix Goncourt. Je ne savais absolument rien. Je ne savais pas qu'il y avait des Juifs, je ne savais pas ce que c'était que les juifs, parce que ma mère a toujours refusé que j'aille au catéchisme, j'ai fait ma première communion, mais c'est ma mère qui m'a fait le catéchisme. Elle ne me laissait pas aller au catéchisme, parce qu'elle me disait qu'il y avait des tas de bêtises qu'on me mettait dans la tête.

D'accord donc il y avait une certaine forme de résistance …

Complétement, oui, oui et elle me disait, sans qu'elle le sache pourquoi : « je n'aime pas qu'on dise que c'est un peuple qui est déicide, qui a tué Jésus. Que ce sont les juifs qui ont tué Jésus Christ » . Pourtant elle pensait que les juifs n'existaient plus, que c'était le peuple de la Bible, mais même comme cela elle pensait que c'était inique de dire que c'était les juifs qui avaient

De les accuser…

« Des accusations contre un peuple sans savoir quoi que ce soit, moi je n'y adhère pas parce que moi si il y a quelque chose qui a tué Jésus Christ, ce sont nos péchés, les péchés de tous les hommes qui continuent, et qui continuent à faire et à perpétrer… donc là-dessus tu ne vas pas entendre toutes histoires. Je vais te soustraire à tout cela. » Donc Elle m'apprenait les prières et tout ça, j'ai passé mon examen de Catéchisme à Casablanca.

Il y avait un examen ?

Oui oui, donc on m'a fait passer un examen, cela s'est bien passé, et puis voilà j'ai pu communier mais ce n'était pas plus que cela, voilà. Quand je suis arrivée à Dakar, j'étais enceinte de mon premier enfant.

Pourquoi vous avez pris la décision d'aller à Dakar ?

Parce que on avait envie que nos enfants naissent en Afrique, pour nous c'était très important.

Et pourquoi Dakar ?

Et bien Dakar parce il y avait aussi une université et je pouvais continuer les études littéraires, il y avait une Fac à Dakar, et après André m'a dit : « tu sais telle que tu es partie, il vaut mieux que tu lises des livres, tu n'as pas besoin d'aller poursuivre des études littéraires, cela ne rime à rien. Il vaut mieux simplement que tu lises des livres qui te plaisent, que tu écrives les choses qui te plaisent et voilà. » J'ai passé une année et demi à la Fac, j'ai réussi la 1 ère année, après on est revenu en Suisse, j'ai été à la Fac de Suisse, mais j'y allais de manière complétement, comment dirais-je, j'y allais en candidate libre, j'y allais suivre les cours qui me plaisaient et voilà.

Justement je me demandais pour André, parce que lui après la guerre il travaillait le jour et il écrivait la nuit, comment il s'était formé à l'écriture ? C'est un autodidacte ?

Oui, il faisait il a continué à aller à la fac mais en candidat libre.

Quelle Fac ?

Je sais qu'il avait un diplôme d'ethnologie, il a suivi le cours d'un grand ethnologue, Levis Strauss. C'était des discussions sans fin avec d'autres copains qui suivaient aussi ces attentivement les cours de Levis Strauss, c'était Lévinas., c'était Henri Atlan? c'était des gens qui allaient partout qui avait une soif de de, il suivait aussi je ne sais plus quel philosophe…

Parce qu'étant à Paris il était dans le milieu intellectuel.

Non pas dans le milieu mais le milieu universitaire. Non, non, non, il n'était pas avec les étudiants, non surtout pas avec ces fils à papa et ces bourgeois. Alors là, non il était très déçu par le milieu estudiantin, il a tout de suite arrêté. Il a même recommencé à travailler en tant qu'ouvrier pour gagner sa vie. Il n'a pas voulu rentrer dans leurs histoires bourgeoises, vraiment alors là non. C'est un type qui a toujours été fidèle à lui-même et à son…, comment dirais-je, à ces gens, à cette classe ouvrière.

Sa famille était aussi de

Parce que je ne sais pas. En tout cas, il a été très marqué par le parti communiste, il a été longtemps communiste, ça a été jusqu'à ce qu'il y ait eu, après l'histoire des blouses blanches, toute cette histoire communiste, les camps, et tout enfin bref évidemment c'était un peu sa famille à un moment donné les communistes, donc voilà

Vous avez passé combien de temps à Dakar ?

Une année et demie.

Et ensuite à Lausanne ?

Nous avons vécu à Lausanne puis on est parti et ensuite on est retourné, la boucle est bouclée, voilà. Donc on a écrit, entre temps on a écrit, Télumée ça a été écrit à Lausanne, Petit Jean en Guadeloupe,

Parce que le premier c'est un plat de porc aux bananes vertes ?

Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes, à Lausanne. On est resté près de 10 années

A Lausanne ?

Oui, donc on a travaillé énormément à Lausanne. La majeure partie du cycle a été écrite à Lausanne, du cycle antillais. Après on a continué, c'était à Lausanne

Vous aviez dit que quand vous aviez rencontré André il parlait déjà un peu créole ?

Oui il parlait créole, il a toujours fréquenté les amis, il était toujours avec les antillais, il était présent au 2 ème congrès des écrivains noirs, il a une photo avec Glissant. Glissant a une photo avec André à ce congrès ; il était comme cela.

Donc il était ami avec Glissant ?

Mais oui, mais oui bien sûr

C'était en 1956

Ne me demandez pas les dates, je ne sais pas, je ne veux pas avoir affaires avec les dates, car ce n'est pas comme ça que je compte le temps.

Après, comment vous avez pu avoir accès à la publication, comment cela s'est passé pour Télumée ?

Ca s'est passé, très bien, j'étais concourable, chaque fois que j'ai publié, j'étais concurable, jusqu'à la fin , jusqu'au deux derniers chaque fois il m'a été dit : « Mme Schwarz-Bart vous n'avez pas de pays . » Voilà enfin bref Télumée, la réception, excellente la critique, bon il y a eu un peu, à la Guadeloupe c'était l'époque des indépendantistes, donc ils pensaient que cela serait bien si j'avais pu publier en créole, en langue créole. Ils vont eux pour publier en créole, je les laisse publier en créole, eux moi je fais comme je veux. Chaque écrivain doit faire comme il veut.

Et après il y a eu l'histoire de la femme africaine.

Pas de la femme africaine, de toutes les femmes de toute la diaspora noire, africaine, brésilienne, américaine noire.

Oui de la femme noire pardon.

Il y a 86 personnages depuis Lucie jusqu'au dernier mannequin noir chez Dior, voilà. Il y a toute cette histoire.

Comment vous avez pu constituer toutes ces histoires…

Alors là avec André surtout… qui était un fouineur, un chercheur, aussi en iconographie… C'est lui qui a d'ailleurs… l'iconographie est aussi un langage volé par nous pour contrebalancer cette image grimaçante des noires que … bon voilà… c'est vraiment une œuvre entière donc il y tout ce qu'on a fait. C'est à vous maintenant de commenter

De valoriser…

et de valoriser. Là je ne suis pas forte pour venir voilà

En tant que femme vous, vous pensez que cela vous a plutôt aidé ou cela a été plus difficile pendant votre carrière d'écrivain ?

Je n'en sais rien, en tout cas je suis très contente d'être une femme. J'estime que je suis une tête couronnée, que je suis une déesse, que j'ai donné la vie à des êtres humains, que j'ai trouvé un homme qui était vieux au début de sa vie, et qui est mort heureux, content, joyeux, tout jeune, tout frais et moi-même j'ai fait ce que moi je sentais nécessaire de faire, donc je remercie les entités, Dieu, je ne sais pas, les Puissances, qui m'ont aidé à réaliser mon rêve. C'est-à-dire que depuis petite, je ne voyais pas un métier. Quel métier veux-tu faire me disait-on ? Et bien je n'en voyais aucun, autre que celui de rêver. Bon je voulais rêver. Quand je disais : « je veux rêver. » Tout le monde me regardait, mais j'ai bien réussi à le faire avec l'écriture, donc voilà. Rêver, faire rêver, et c'est ça.

Et vous n'avez jamais appartenu à des mouvements féministes ou est ce qu'il y a eu des liens ?

Je n'ai jamais appartenu à aucun mouvement, et Féministes, je n'ai pas besoin d'être dans un mouvement pour être féministe, parler de ce que je vois, des injustices sans arrêt, répétées, etc. que je voyais que les femmes subissaient autour de moi, donc c'est en rapportant toutes ces iniquités, toutes ces vies gâchées, toutes ces violations de…de …. comment dirais-je …de la noblesse humaine que je suis le plus féministe, et c'est cela pour moi. C'est ainsi que je suis, c'est comme ça que je conçois moi ma part de féminisme, voilà.

Comment vous expliquez que pour la question des prix, que vous soyez passée si prés …

Il n'y a aucune explication, je n'en sais rien, et vraiment peut-être que c'est une grande chance que je n'ai pas eu le prix parce que… en fait je n'en ressens absolument pas la nécessité, ni le besoin, ni le manque ou quoi que se soit. Pour moi la nécessité est avant tout d'écrire, de publier, de pouvoir publier et de pouvoir continuer à écrire. C'est en cela le plus grand prix, le prix d'écriture, voilà.

Vous continuez à travailler sur des projets ?

Je n'ai pas fini le cycle, je dois terminer, j'ai toutes mes nouvelles, j'ai au moins 50 nouvelles à publier, j'ai des contes d'enfants, j'ai beaucoup de choses à faire, vous savez, il me faudrait encore 100 ans et voilà que je vais avoir 80 ans. Qu'est-ce que vous pensez de cela ? Méditez (rire) , donc je vais vous laisser, car je pense que vous avez de quoi faire, non ?

INTERVIEW WITH SIMONE SCHWARZ-BART

Paris, July 21, 2017, at 3:00 pm, on the terrace of a café in the 13th *arrondissement*

Translation Hannah HUGHES

If you could tell me a bit about your family history, your grandparents, your parents…

Yes, I was born in 1938. I returned to the Antilles when I was 3 months old with my mother who was a teacher. And my father who was in the military stayed, he remained in Europe because he was… he had his career and there was a war, at that time we were forced to separate. So my mother was a teacher in the countryside. At that time, when you went into a teaching career, it was really a true vocation because the children arrived in class very late, because their parents needed them. They kept them at home to help make charcoal, garden, all kinds of work and even to help babysit their other brothers and sisters. So the children had chores, and they had to finish their chores before going to school. So much so that by the time they arrived in class, they were 10 or 11 year-old children. And so my mother was somebody who taught all levels, from first grade to the beginning of *CP*[5], all the way to the *certificat d'études*[6], so all the grades were in one, to supervise the all little ones. There was mutual support, a kind of competitive spirit and the children felt that it was very important for them to study, to learn so they wouldn't have to work the fields like their parents, wouldn't have to work cane, or bananas or vanilla, or cocoa because at that time we always practiced polyculture. It was not at all monoculture where you only have cane fields or banana plantations. There was a lot of diversity. There were cocoa fields, fields of coffee trees and, incidentally, the coffee from Guadeloupe was used to improve other coffees it was so excellent. So, you see, when we sent it to France, this coffee was often used as a flavor enhancer. And there were also many people who cultivated vanilla. So, it's a crop that requires a lot of care because you have to fertilize it by hand, so there was all that. There were these processing activities in the *bonifieries*[7] that took place right after harvest... they led to people gathering, meeting, and also to sharing tasks between one another. Some washed the coffee, the others laid it out to dry. There was really a great deal of collective work and collective songs to this labor. On the cocoa plantations when the women gathered the cocoa pods, well everyone sang. It was a big party…

And your mother?

So my mother at that time, she was getting all these kids and she saw to their learning…

[5] Translator's Note: Sixth grade. Terms dealing with French education have been kept in the original French with rough equivalents provided.
[6] A certificate earned at the end of primary school.
[7] *Bonifierie* designates the place where coffee processing took place after the harvest.

almost all these children arrived and succeeded, she made them catch up. So then, I followed a normal curriculum without needing to catch up or anything, I was often… she had to spend a lot more energy caring for the pupils she had to educate than for me… so I was in the schoolyard, and it's there too that I often spoke creole with my little classmates, we would go off, we would go to the cemeteries, we would go visit; there was a cemetery right behind the school, that's where we had our little meetings in the cemetery with all the bones that had been unearthed by the rain and erosion, uh…

What village was that in?

It was in the three rivers village in the Schoelsher area.

Oh right, not very far from Goyave…

Exactly, since going from Goyave towards Basse Terre, first you have to pass by Bananier, Capesterre, and so on

Your mother's parents were from that area?

No, no. My mother was an orphan. My mother was an orphan child who had lost both her parents, and she was taken in and cared for by a lady who already had 7 or 8 children I think. So then, she knew that my grandmother was a teacher herself; and before dying she left a letter for my mother in which she told her she leaving her, that she was alone in the world, and that only an education would allow her to earn a living easily and honestly. So my mother always had the letter, her mother's letter in her pocket; she always had on a little dress with pockets and she kept this letter because this lady's other children, they were well-off, so they didn't need to work whereas my mother would go out under the street lamp to do her lessons. She would go out to the street lamp at the intersection since, you know at that time those were the days of oil lamps, and you always had to save on kerosene. At a given time you put out the lamps, all the fires would be extinguished. Then if you still wanted to read or study, you had to go out to the street lamp, and that's how it was…

So her mother had been one of the first teachers…

So I didn't know her at all, she belonged to the sort of women who were completely devoted to their mission, to their mission as conveyors of knowledge. There were also songs. The songs, I'll give you the words to these songs, the tune… we would be lined up in the schoolyard before going in, they put us in order to listen politely to the lesson they were going to give and there we sang: "let's work to learn, to understand, and to love. When couples are well read, they will cease cutting each other's throats. Under the skies filled with stars, the beauty will be resplendent. We will voyage with full sails on the waves of Brotherhood." You see, these were not idle words; the ideals behind education were expressed in the songs. It was not easy, we had to internalize the words we uttered, and they had to put us in a position to carry them out. So, the professors didn't make us sing just anything. They were songs then that also praised knowledge,

and actually they were perhaps naive by promoting this curriculum with us but it was a curriculum which for this generation was… you really believed in it, you really believed in education; you really believed in knowledge and you really thought that it was the key to better humankind. So these songs and these lessons were very important, because in there you had the moral lesson and the explanation. The schoolmistress was never satisfied… There was the sentence to comment on every day, which was on the blackboard and you gave your commentary. She would then comment on the sentence herself and then she would ask each pupil what they thought, how they had understood this sentence, how was it, what they saw… because meanwhile this molded human beings, and it didn't just fill heads with knowledge, it also molded a mind capable of analyzing.

Okay. And, your Grandmother came from the same area?

I don't know where my grandmother came from… My maternal grandmother that is

And to be a teacher you had to get your* certificat d'études*?

Oh no, you got the *Brevet élémentaire,*[8] and when you had a *Brevet élémentaire* back then, it was a lot more than the current *Bac*[9], so yes, it was knowledge too.

And you continued after high school?

I came to take my *Bac* here. My last year my mother wanted to make me have a change of pace, because actually, I should tell you, "France" was like Mecca. You had to go to France and if possible if you'd gotten your diploma in France, you knew something else, your mind was opened, because France was the country where young people were beautiful, good, splendid, justice on Earth must reign, where because of the Revolution, a foreigner should get a brotherly welcome, well everything you heard… all these beautiful things which were supposed to come from French history and made France the country where Jesus Christ himself had come down, well (laughter). So well, you understand that when we got there, and they refused to give us apartment rentals, rentals… we ended up confined to hotels piled up on top of each other et cetera, et cetera, in short, we started to see what good, well, France was no exception to the rule that said humans should be, um well

So the reception was not so… brotherly…

Yes because, before when French people came to the Antillean islands, they were received like Gods, they were received exactly like when Christopher Columbus showed up to the Indians, and the Indians wondered whether they were Gods coming to visit them, whereas Christopher Columbus had already decided to exterminate them. And, and, well... I wouldn't go that far… I wouldn't take it to that point, but I mean the

[8] Diploma awarded at age sixteen.
[9] *Baccalauréat*: high school diploma.

two frames of mind were completely different. And so when we made all these people feel welcome, we really thought that we too, we were going to be welcomed in the same way. Indeed, we thought the Gauls were our ancestors. It was afterwards when we came here, then we questioned our Gallic heritage. But otherwise we accepted it wholeheartedly and we knew France's inside and out. We knew it all. It was our history, it was us you know, and we overlooked that Gauls had blond hair and blue eyes, (laughter) oh yes, we overlooked that (laughter)! And too bad, my word! But there you are, when we got here, we knew what all that meant. And when they asked if Guadeloupe was close to Madagascar or if Guadeloupe was towards the Comoros and that sort of thing… "Is this possible, so they don't know us?" "Oh my God!" "How is this possible, us their children? " And so, that's where the seed was planted.

In the end it was coming here that…

It was coming here yes, it was by coming here that the questioning began. Because even over there, when you're called, when someone would say to you "old negro" it just means you're a person, a bad person, negro means anybody for us, it meant "person". But here negro, negro has another connotation, and you feel it when someone says it to your face. So that's when you realize that "oh yes, huh it's true, how awful! how awful!" This is why Antillean children who were born here, and who went to the school here asked their parents: "But why aren't we white? Why are we black?" There was a whole soul-searching, because the Antillean community at that time was not doing the work. They couldn't do the work because for them there was no point since we were France's children. We were France's children, we had winter, I learned all the poems on… I dreamed about snow, I didn't dream about mangoes, I dreamed about snow, that's what we learned. And sometimes I also had nightmares that I was in the snow, that the snow was falling, that the snow was falling, higher and higher, higher and higher and buried me. I had snow nightmares.

Here or in Guadeloupe…

In Guadeloupe, yes I was, we were surfing on two boards at the same time: we were surfing on this French board. But we knew all the same that it was not quite… how to put it… we were the illegitimate children of the Good Lord. That's it, we were illegitimate children, we were illegitimate children. We knew we were not the heirs, the heirs, the heirs were *Békés* [10]they were white…. For example, at Church, maybe they told you too… at Church there were the reserved benches up front with the names of these families, and us, we had to sit in the back. For example, when there were coronation of the Virgin ceremonies, because May is the month of the Virgin. And every afternoon we go, we sing, we make rosaries to the Virgin, "Hail, Hail Mary." And in May there's the coronation of the Virgin, and not a single time has a little colored girl gotten, how should I put it, the grace or the great honor to carry the Virgin, we were not

[10] TN: *Béké* is an Antillean Creole term designating white people of European origin.

worthy. Our hands were dirty hands, we were sinful people. We were “sin bags.” So, of course, we knew that, it was the priest, it's the priest himself who instilled this in us, so that

Through religion?

Through religion, we learned our place

And through Christ one could be saved? There was no forgiveness of sins?

Yes there was, Christ forgives everyone, but our souls were blacker than other people's. In any event we are guilty, we are guilty, guilty of what? I really don't know. I really don't know. In any case we knew it, because you had St Michael, there was a great devotion to St Michael, St Michael defeating the demon, defeating Satan who is a Black person; St Michael is handsome, blond with his sword, and there’s the Black demon, how... how... can you not...

Identify with it

Identify with it, yes, how can you not identify with it, when every time someone called you Satan, called you a demon, we were called all those things… we mixed all that up

So when you arrived here it was a rather difficult experience? You were 16 years old, right?

Yes, but at the same time I had a light heart. I had a light heart, that is, as my mother always used to tell me: “we were trained in the sugar factories and we became factories ourselves. And we're factories because what we manufacture is ourselves; we make ourselves; you have to make yourself and it's also you who must forgive and forgive them. My mother was of the belief: “mercy for all sin.” If they treat you like a Negress, rise above it, because “my daughter you know who you are, nobody can teach you who you are. Let people say this, that. You know who you are and you know your value, be satisfied with that and don't talk back. It's useless to talk back to people who don't want to listen. For one thing, if they've said that to you it's because they don't want to listen, they don't want to see you, they don't want to listen to you. For another, if you start discussing their prejudices it's because you're taking their prejudices to heart, it's because you're giving them weight, so stop that. And rise, rise, rise above. Find a way to have wings, don't take that in your heart. And accomplish your destiny.” So my mom was always a very independent person also because she had to get through the whole war without my father, fighting all alone, and also seeing people's poverty. She was a compassionate person. Since she had a monthly income from her teaching job, she lent money to everyone, people who wanted to open a small business, people who wanted to marry their child and didn't have the means, and didn't want to suffer the humiliation, this and that. And well mom was always that way. I was an only child but when I asked her: “I would like a new dress,” she would say to me: “*you* have 3 dresses and you know that little girlfriend of yours, she only has one that her mom washes and dries Thursday

to give back to her Friday morning so that she is clean. So before I give you a 4th dress, perhaps I will give another one to the little girl who only has one. What do you think of that?" So I would say "yes, of course. It's no big deal." And so for my mother it wasn't important to accumulate things, to accumulate belongings, some of this and that, not at all, no, no, no, she stripped down to the essentials. And so I had a pretty austere upbringing but I absolutely did not suffer from it, in fact I didn't even notice it. It's now that I see it was so austere, but I didn't experience it as such, because everyone was living in austerity, so anyway. On the other hand, my real life, my true moment of total happiness was the end of lessons, the end of classes when we would go to my paternal grandmother and grandfather's house.

So they were also from Guadeloupe?

Yes, they were also from Guadeloupe and they lived in Goyave, we came to Goyave because of them, so I have all my ghosts in Goyave, you know. I have my grandparents, I have my parents, I have my husband, everyone, so for me Goyave is a charged place. But when I'm there, I feel like I'm in my place, I feel like I'm with my whole family. With my paternal grandparents, it was an entirely different thing because my grandmother was from Saint Martin, so my grandmother spoke English and Creole and my grandfather was from Bordeaux. He was a white man from Bordeaux with blue eyes. He was a wine merchant who had never traded wine for rum (laughter). For him drinking wine was like taking communion everyday, when he drank his glass of Saint Emilion everyday he looked at the aroma of his wine, he sang for his wine, he had a vine song or a wine song. He was incredibly alone in Goyave in a place just as lost.

So how did he end up in Goyave?

He ended up in Goyave because my grandmother, like I told you my grandmother was from the island Saint Martin, she was very poor, it was an extremely poor island at the time, so she left Saint Martin to look for work in Guadeloupe. She came, she got a job working for my grandfather, and my grandfather at that moment, my grandfather was completely uh, how should I put it, fascinated by this silent, mysterious person. My grandmother was connected to the trees, to the elements. She was an extremely mystic and solitary person, so she had a sort of silent and shining presence, and there you go …For example, she was the kind of person who would tell you: "the leaves of the mango tree have fallen all at once at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, there is going to be a death, I'm sure that a soul has departed, the mango tree warned me." So you see, she was that kind of person. And my grandfather fell in love with this woman, and he married her. At that time, all the *békés*, the white people banded together and ruined him, so he was ruined, he was a wine merchant.

He came to Guadeloupe for the wine trade?

I believe his father was already in Guadeloupe, and he took his place.

So he was ruined…

So, in the end no one bought anything from him. Anyway, as usual there was no place, there was no place for mixed couples, above all in those times. The Black community told my grandmother she must think herself a queen to have married a white man, what did she believe, who did she think she was. She must not see that she was a little old negro girl who didn't even know how to read or write. And did she think that that white man was capable of seeing her beauty, and etc. Off they go and happily ever after. And the whites on their end: "What's wrong with him getting mixed up with a negress, what has that one got, what more does she have than all these little brown negresses that we can have anytime."

Why marry her?

Why marry her, why? Well, these being the circumstances they bought a small island facing the Pointe-à-Pitre harbor and they got away from the nonsense of the two communities and they lived like Robinson Crusoe on his island. So, they had 6 children on that island, so that's my father, my uncles and aunts. And during the 1928 hurricane they were completely ruined: their house demolished, the animals because my grandmother know a lot about caring for animals, she had cows, she milked them, she made butter. At that time, importing butter from France was a huge hassle . But her being from Saint Martin, there were a lot of animals in Saint Martin, a lot of livestock, so she knew how to barter, I don't know how, but she knew, she made butter, cheese, and she sent my grandfather to sell it all to the whites who were fond of it all. Well, that's how it was since they didn't want him to continue in the wine business. But afterwards, they were ruined, after the hurricane. The animals were dead, they lost everything. So they went back to the little house they had in Goyave, where they would go to get a change of scenery. Because throughout the whole year they were by the sea and during vacations they would take their children to breathe the air in the mountains in Goyave. And that's how it came to be that they were back in Goyave et how my mother would go to see her in-laws during school vacations since my father wasn't there. At least she had family that way. It was a time when Goyave wasn't Goyave, everything I tell in *Télumée*[11], I don't know if you've read it?

Yes yes of course

Everything I say happens in Goyave. All the Télumée people, the Télumée sisters, all those people, actually I have photos of all those people, you have to know that, well, it was in fact, it was in the middle of nowhere, so you had to… My white grandfather from Bordeaux, would send friends who had a cart with oxen and all that who would come meet my mother and me at the crossroads. We would take the bus, we would get to the colonial road, because it was the colonial road at the time, and from the colonial road to

[11] TN: *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* was translated in English by Barbara Bray and titled *The Bridge of Beyond.*

Goyave, the road was really just dirt, and we would go up like that with the oxen.

That was your vacation?

Yes, it was a vacation and it was at the same time the most beautiful period of my life. I saw this couple before me who had nothing to do together, my grandfather and my grandmother and who, of all the people I knew, were the happiest couple on earth. Everyday my grandfather would say to my grandmother: "Marie, I love you" in French, in Creole, and in English. Everyday, he always had something for her, everyday she had a little dish to make for her husband. They were people who loved each other perhaps because they were sheltered from people because they were in this lost place. Sometimes it was very difficult to be together. But for them, I believe that for them this was a blessing.

So you took the* Bac *here

Yes, I took the *Bac* here, but later on since I'm such a messy person, I missed the date, I was so disorganized, it wasn't possible and I missed my chance to take the *Bac*.

What high school were you at?

I believe I was at Jules Ferry High School, I believe in the 18th *arrondissement*. I was at the high school near Place Clichy.

And whom did you live with?

With my mom, my mother came with me, we lived together.

So she had finished working?

Yes, yes she was retired, and she came with me, either since she was retired, or because she wanted to take a year to help me adjust to life in France, together, to search with me, to see how her daughter got on, how I felt, did I stay or would I want to leave. That's how we ended up in the 18th *arrondissement*.

Was it your mother's first time?

No, no

Because of your father after the war?

My father had, we had already gone to France with my father. We had been to Marseille, I was maybe 9 years old, I was maybe 8, 9 years old maybe 6 years old when my father came home from the war. Afterwards, he was assigned to Morocco, my military dad, he was in charge of a thing [inaudible] in Morocco. We went back to Morocco with my father, I had my first communion in Casablanca, so we went through Marseille. But then, I don't really remember much.

So he finished his military career in Morocco?

No, no after he joined up again because of the Vietnam war, he joined back up, he had asked to retire before…

Early retirement

Early, early retirement which they had given him, since he had so many years of service, at war everywhere… He had also already been to Vietnam, anyway, he had served in Congo, I know he served in Lebanon, he had served in…

All the wars of decolonization

Yes, yes. But well, he didn't want to anymore, he had had enough… And that's what led him to buy the property in Goyave, to get away from everyone as well, from everything, and to be near his roots at the same time

So you stayed with your mother during high school and after you went on?

Since I had missed my chance to take the Bac, I had to go to an office where they would tell me what else I could do and that's how I met André, as I had gotten lost, he was there to get me back on track, to get another summons to take the exam, and that's how it began.

You passed the* Bac*?

Yes, yes of course.

And after that did you go to university?

After that, I was at the University, I was in Assas, I was studying law, I did a year of law, but it was a disaster, it wasn't for me, no I didn't like it, it wasn't my thing, I didn't like it at all. I just liked some of my friends, some classmates I met, people I connected with but other than that it didn't last very long. After that year of university, André and I got married, and we went to Dakar.

Because when you met him, it was when he published Le Dernier des justes.[12] ***He had submitted his manuscript.***

Yes, he had just submitted his manuscript. Me, I didn't know anything about it… I wasn't part of that literary world. I didn't know what the Prix Goncourt[13] was, I didn't know who had already gotten the Prix Goncourt. I didn't know anything at all. I didn't know that there were Jews, I didn't know what Jewish people were, because my mother always refused to let me go to catechism, I had had my first communion but my mother was the one who taught me catechism. She wouldn't let me go to catechism because, she used to tell me, they fill your head with all sorts of silly things.

[12] TN: *Le Dernier des justes* was translated by Stephen Becker and titled *The Last of the Just.*
[13] TN: The Goncourt Prize, a prize in French literature.

I see, so there was a certain sense of resistance?

Definitely, yes, yes and she would tell me, without knowing why: "I don't like that they say that they're deicidal, that they killed Jesus. That it was the Jews who killed Jesus Christ." Although, she believed that the Jews didn't exist anymore, that they were a biblical people, but even still she thought it wasn't right to say that it was the Jews who had

To accuse them…

"Accusations against a people without knowing anything, I won't go along with it because I, if there's anything that killed Jesus Christ, it was our sins, the sins of all men who go on and on committing and perpetrating… so you're not going to hear all the stories about that. I'm going to protect you from all that." So she taught me the prayers and all that, I took my catechism test in Casablanca.

There was a test?

Yes, yes, so they made me take a test, which went well, and then I was able to receive communion and it was no more than that. When I got to Dakar, I was pregnant with my first child.

Why did you decide to go to Dakar?

Because we wanted our children to be born in Africa, it was really important to us.

And why Dakar?

Well Dakar because it also had a university and I could continue my literary studies, there was a department of literature in Dakar, and after André told me: "you know since you've left, it's better if you just read books, you don't need to pursue literary studies, it's pointless. It's better to simply read books that you like, to write things that you like and that's all." I spent a year and a half at uni there, I passed the first year, and after that we went back to Switzerland, I went to the Swiss university, but I went there completely, how should I put it, I was an independent student, I just took classes that interested me.

I was just wondering about André, because after the war he was working days and writing at night, how did he get trained as a writer? Is he self-taught?

Yes, he did, he continued to go to uni but as an independent student.

Which department?

I know he had an ethnology degree, he took classes with the great ethnologist, Levi Strauss. He would have endless discussions with some other friends who also diligently went to Levi Strauss's classes, there was Lévinas, and Henri Atlan? It was all those folks who went about with a thirst for, for, he studied with another philosopher, I don't remember which…

Because being in Paris he was in academia?

No, no, no, he didn't hang out with the students there, especially not those daddy's boys and rich kids. So, no he was very disappointed with the students, he quit right away. He even started working as a laborer again to earn a living. He didn't want to get mixed up in their bourgeois drama, no, heaven forbid. He was the kind of person that was always loyal to himself and to his…, how should I put it, to the people, to the working class.

His family was also…

I don't know why. At any rate, he was very affected by the communist party, he had been a communist for a long time, that was up until there was that, after that doctor's plot, that whole communist affair, the camps, and anyway, of course, it was kind of his family, at one point the communists, so

How much time did you spend in Dakar?

A year and a half.

And then in Lausanne?

We lived in Lausanne then we left and then we came back, so full circle. So, we wrote, in the meantime we wrote, *Télumée*, that was written in Lausanne. *Ti Jean L'horizon* in Guadeloupe,

Because the first one was un plat de porc aux bananes vertes?

Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes,[14] in Lausanne. We stayed near on 10 years.

In Lausanne?

Yes, so we worked a lot in Lausanne. The majority of *The Cycle* was written in Lausanne, about the West Indian cycle. After, we carried on, it was in Lausanne.

You had said that when you met André he already spoke a bit of Creole?

Yes, he spoke Creole, he always hung out with friends, he was always with West Indians, he attended the 2nd Congress of Black Writers, he has a photo with Glissant. Glissant has a photo with André at that congress; that's what he was like.

So he was friends with Glissant?

Yes, yes of course

That was in '56

Don't ask me the dates, I don't know, I don't want to deal with dates, because that's not

[14] TN: This book not been translated to English. The literal translation would be "A Plate of Pork With Green Bananas."

how I keep track of time.

Afterwards, how were you able to get published, how did that go for* Télumée*?

It went, very well, I was able to compete for the Prix Goncourt every time I published, I was competitive, up to the end, up until the last two chapters every time I've been told: "Mrs. Schwarz-Bart you don't have a country." Well anyway, *Télumée*, the reception, the criticism was excellent, well there was a bit of, in Guadeloupe it was the era of separatists, so they thought it would have been good if I had published in Creole, in the Creole language. They're in favor of publishing in Creole, they can go ahead and publish in Creole, but I'll do what I want. Every writer has to do what they want.

And after that there was the story about African women.

Not African women, all women from the entire Black diaspora, Afro-Brazilian women, Black American women.

Yes, about Black women, sorry.

There were 86 characters from Lucie up to the last Black model for Dior. There's this whole story.

How did you come up with all these stories…

So that, mainly with André… who was a digger, a researcher, also of iconography… He's the one moreover who… iconography is also a language we stole to offset this distorted image of Black people who, well… it's really an entire work so there's everything we've done. It's up to you now to interpret it

To value it…

And to value it. There, I am not strong…

Do you think being a woman may have helped or made things harder in your career as a writer?

I really don't know, in any case I'm very happy to be a woman. The way I see it I wear a crown, I'm a goddess, I've given life to human beings, I found a man who was old at the beginning of his life, and who died happy, content, joyous, totally young, totally fresh and me, I did what I felt I had to do, so I'm grateful to those above, to God, I don't know, to whatever higher powers helped me achieve my dream. That is, since I was little I didn't know what I wanted to be. What job do you want to do, people would ask? And well, I didn't see any other job than dreaming. So, I wanted to dream. When I would say: "I want to dream." Everyone would look at me funny, but I did a really good job of doing it with writing. Dreaming, making others dream, that's it.

And you never belonged to feminist movements or did you have those connections?

I never belonged to any movement, and feminists, I don't need to be part of a movement

to be a feminist, to talk about what I see, injustices without end, over and over again, etc. I would see women suffering around me, so it was by reporting all these inequities, all these ruined lives, all these violations of… of… how should I put it… of human dignity that I feel the most feminist, and that's what it is for me. That's how I am, that's how I conceive of my role as a feminist.

How do you explain the issue with the awards, that you have come so close…

There's no explanation, I don't know, and really maybe it's a great blessing that I never got an award because… in fact, I don't feel the necessity at all, or the need, or the lack or anything. For me, what is necessary above all is to write, to publish, to be able to publish and to be able to continue to write. That is in itself the greatest award, the award of writing.

Are you still working on projects?

I did not finish *The Cycle*, I need to finish, I have all my short stories, I have at least 50 short stories to publish, I have some children's books, I have a lot to do, you know, I would need another 100 years and well, I'm about to turn 80. What do you think about that? Think about it (laughter), so I'll let you go, because I think you've got plenty to do, right?

APPENDICE 3. Interview with Gisèle Pineau

Entretien avec Gisèle Pineau le 10 mai 2017 sur la terrasse de sa maison à Marie-Galantes.

Donc vous me disiez, vous avez 61 ans, vous êtes née en 1956.

J'ai 61 ans, je suis née en 1956 à Paris. Je suis une guadeloupéenne parisienne, ou une parisienne guadeloupéenne, ou une guadeloupéenne née à Paris.

Très bien. Donc mes premières questions portent sur votre milieu familial. Donc vous êtes née à Paris…

Je suis née à Paris parce que mon père, il s'est engagé dans la 2nd guerre mondiale et puis à l'issue de la guerre, il est resté dans l'armée française, il a fait carrière. Il a terminé avec le grade d'adjudant-chef de l'armée française. C'était le temps des colonies. C'était juste avant que la Guadeloupe devienne un département français, c'était une période comme ça où il y avait encore beaucoup de complexes des antillais. Mes parents, les gens que fréquentaient mes parents ne parlaient pas beaucoup la langue créole. Alors le contexte qu'est-ce que c'est ? c'est des guadeloupéens qui sont nés en Guadeloupe. Mon père est militaire, ma mère est femme au foyer qui a été séduite par l'attrait, la beauté de l'uniforme de l'armée française. Et elle a connu mon père à peine …et puis au bout de 3 mois ils se sont mariés. A l'époque les traversés se faisaient par les paquebots transatlantiques. La traversée durait une dizaine de jours. Les gens arrivaient soit à Marseilles, soit au Havre. Et puis voilà comment on débarque dans cette France-là. Et moi je suis née à Paris, mes frères et sœurs, mes parents ont débarqué dans ce contexte-là.

Et ce que je me demandais, qu'est-ce qui a attiré votre père à entrer dans l'armée française, dans les forces libres c'est ça, au moment de la guerre ?

Oui, en tant que dissidents, comme beaucoup de jeunes guadeloupéens. Et bien c'était se rebeller contre les forces du maréchal Pétain.

Et lui il avait quel âge ?

Il avait 17 ans, 17 18 ans.

Et il a fait des études ?

Non il était au lycée Carnot, il apprenait la menuiserie. Mais c'était un élève brillant, ses parents. Mon grand-père paternel a lui-même fait la 1ère guerre mondiale. Il a participé à la 1ère guerre mondiale. Il avait été incorporé de force, c'était pas un acte volontaire comme mon père, qui lui a embarqué de nuit dans un canot de pêcheur ; les pêcheurs qui servaient de passeurs et qui conduisaient tous les jeunes fougueux qui voulaient libérer la France, parce qu'ils étaient enfiévrés comme ça par cette liberté et

c'était important pour eux de se battre pour la liberté et cet amour de la France, cet amour inconditionnel, les gens étaient prêts à mourir pour la France.

Oui parce que la Guadeloupe était sous l'occupation du gouvernement de Vichy, comme la Martinique….

Mais bien sûr, c'était Vichy sous les Tropiques ! Alors en Martinique il y avait l'amiral Robert, et en Guadeloupe c'était le gouverneur Sorin. Et tous les matins, les enfants à l'école soulevaient le drapeau et chanter Maréchal nous voilà. Et il y avaient tous ces gens qui écoutaient le Maréchal De Gaulle à la radio et qui à l'époque l'appelait le général micro, parce que sur les affiches qui étaient placardés la nuit par les dissidents sur toutes les façades des maisons, sur la mairie, on voyait un dessin avec un homme qui parlait avec le gros micro là. C'était en Angleterre, il était au Royaume Unis et on l'appelait le général Micro, parce qu'il avait ce micro là dessiné. Général Micro, on va suivre le général Micro, c'était un appel à la résistance. Et je crois que les guadeloupéens ont cette âme de résistant, de ne pas se laisser brimer dans leur liberté. Il y a une histoire qui fait écho à tout ça, c'est la Grande histoire. Alors mon père décide de faire carrière finalement, c'était sa voie.

C'était sa voie

C'était sa voie. Il était très fier, il a fait les colonies.

Il n'a pas été déçu par la France ?

Mon père n'a jamais été déçu par la France, il a beaucoup voyagé avec la France. Il a fait des guerres. Il a été au Vietnam, à l'époque c'était l'indochine. Il a fait la guerre d'Indochine. Là c'était avant ma naissance. C'était tous les jeunes des colonies françaises qui servaient la France partout dans le monde et permettait à cette France de maintenir les gens sous son emprise. Etre dans la grande famille de l'empire, l'empire français partout dans le monde, la gloire de cette France, servir tout ça. Et les peuples qui étaient dominés ont dû se battre pour arracher leur indépendance.

Oui et même pour bénéficier de leurs indemnités après la seconde guerre mondiale, je pense au Sénégal…

Au Sénégal ; non mais ça c'est pff… ça ce n'est même pas, ça ce sont des considérations qui ne sont pas dans le politiquement correct. Et c'est là que l'on voit que les êtres humains, selon la couleur de leur peau, sont traités différemment, quoiqu'on dise aujourd'hui. Nous sommes au 21ème siècle mais les êtres humains sont traités différemment.

Oui, oui. Mais pour lui, il n'a pas eu de problème pour faire une carrière dans l'armée française ?

Non puisqu'il y avait beaucoup d'antillais qui étaient là. Et alors donc, il s'est retrouvé au Vietnam, enfin à l'époque l'Indochine, euh pendant deux ans. Il a eu une femme là-bas, il a eu deux enfants.

Oui j'ai lu ça et qui ont cohabité après avec votre famille à Paris

Oui je le raconte dans un de mes livres, dans mes quatre femmes. Et puis, ensuite il a fait le Sénégal. Il avait eu un garçon déjà avant de se marier avec ma mère. Il a fait également le Congo Brazaville. Et là j'étais déjà née, j'avais peut-être deux ans, trois ans. Nous sommes au Congo, dans les quartiers militaires bien sûr. C'est comme un village avec tous ces militaires français. On est dans ce monde

C'est une base militaire

Oui une base militaire où les familles sont logées. C'est la présence de la France dans ce Congo là. Et en 61, en 60, mon père revient en France, et comme tous les militaires il a le droit de repasser dans son pays natal, dans son île. Comme les Corses ont le droit d'aller 3 mois en Corse, les Guadeloupéens ont le droit d'aller trois mois en Guadeloupe ; en Martinique c'est pareil. Donc congés de fin de campagne. Et c'est là qu'il retrouve sa mère qui va faire le voyage jusqu'en France avec nous, et ce qui va énormément compter pour moi. Elle va rester en France de 61 à 69 …pendant les évènements ou après les évènements de mai 68. Et donc cette grand-mère, c'est ce qu'il faut imaginer, une famille de noirs, dans un appartement de la banlieue parisienne où il y a beaucoup de militaires, de familles de militaires. Il faut imaginer ces six enfants dans un petit appartement finalement puisqu'il y avait trois chambres, la chambre des filles, la chambre des garçons, la chambre des parents. Nous sommes là avec ma mère, mon père est souvent absent. Il part, il est parti pendant trois, quatre ans en Polynesie française où il a eu deux enfants. Il a eu une autre vie encore là-bas.

Et sa femme du Vietnam

Alors elle était repartie. L'Indochine était devenue le Vietnam entre temps. C'est une histoire vraiment, c'est comme une saga en fait…Donc l'un des garçons qu'il a eue de cette femme au temps où le Vietnam était l'Indochine, il a demandé à un de ses amis militaires comme lui de l'adopter parce que cet ami était célibataire. Donc c'était l'ainé. Le deuxième, il a essayé de le faire partir en Guadeloupe directement avec la maman. Donc il a essayé de s'occuper de ses enfants. Finalement moi je découvre quand j'ai 30 ans que j'ai toujours considéré comme le fils ainé d'une autre famille est mon demi-frère.

Oui. Ah vous le retrouvez ici

Je l'ai retrouvé. On nous a dit voilà c'est votre frère, bon. Cela explique peut-être pourquoi, cela vient tout naturellement dans mes romans, on retrouve beaucoup de

secrets de famille. J'aime beaucoup aller dans l'intimité des familles, et derrière ce que l'on veut bien nous montrer aussi.

Oui bien sûr

Et puis bon Tahiti, il a fait plusieurs séjours, les traversées étaient très longues à l'époque, c'était par bateau. Et puis il revenait comme ça sans prévenir, alors que nous on avait déjà une vie organisée. C'était beaucoup de terreur. Mon père était très très sévère, et puis il revenait, on le connaissait à peine. On le connaissait pour sa violence. Et les filles de ma famille, nous avec ma sœur ainée, on le connaissait pour euh…par ses attitudes qu'il avait qui n'étaient pas les attitudes d'un père. C'est à dire qu'avec ma sœur ainée, nous avons eu droit à des attouchements. Oui je suis obligée de le dire pour bien expliquer aussi. Et donc pourquoi j'écris Elise, pourquoi j'écris. Je suis une petite fille, je suis sommée de survivre, de trouver moyen de survivre à la violence extérieure, parce que c'est le racisme. Je vais à l'école, on me traite de négresse, retourne en Afrique dans ta case en paille. Je n'ai pas d'amie. Je suis là, dépossédée de moi-même, c'est comme un oiseau qui ne peut pas ouvrir ses ailes. Je ne peux pas rire, parce que c'est tous les jours, mouton noir, négresse, va en Afrique.

Et vos frère et sœurs vivent la même chose ?

Pas tous. Mais peut être moi j'étais là et je…pas tous mes frères et sœurs. On les appelait mais peut être qu'ils s'en moquaient. Et moi, ça me touchait, ça me perçait, ça me transperçait.

Dans la fratrie vous êtes …

Euh la quatrième. Sans compter …

Oui oui

Et donc après coup. Tout à l'heure je vous ai dis que j'ai 61 ans. J'ai atteint cet âge-là, je me suis, j'ai fini par me recentrer et me dire ben voilà, tout ça pour ça. Voilà. Donc cette enfance-là, j'ai une perspective qui est différente. Aujourd'hui, enfin maintenant, je dis voilà, mais j'ai sauvé ma peau, parce qu'à l'intérieur c'était dangereux, violent, il y avait des coups aussi, des coups de ceinture. Je voyais ça, mon frère qui ramenait 0 de conduite, bon il était battu avec un ceinturon. C'était très violent. Ma sœur ainée qui était victime d'attouchement et puis…On parle pas dans ma famille, on ne dit pas les choses. Ma mère qui ne nous protégeait pas. Elle était là. Mais elle-même elle était, alors je n'ai pas fait de psychanalyse mais peut être mes livres m'ont permis de me …Mais c'était une violence aussi de sentir qu'on est en danger. La mère elle est là, elle lit des romans d'amour, c'est ça aussi. Moi j'écris des livres, j'écris des livres mais c'est une vie comme ça un peu sur le fil. Et j'écris mon 1er roman à 10 ans. Pas de poésie vraiment. Raconter une histoire, fabriquer des histoires.

Oui vous racontiez même que vous vendiez des petites histoires ?

Oui, oui

Est-ce que vous les avez gardées ?

Non, non parce que j'ai voyagé. Je découpais des feuilles, ça je l'ai dit à plusieurs reprises, je recopiais mon histoire…

Et à 10 ans, c'était un roman.

Un roman. Un roman. Un petit roman

Et ça vous l'avez gardé ?

Et non je ne l'ai pas gardé. On a déménagé en 1970, quand le général De Gaulle a quitté le pouvoir, parce que les Français ont dit non à son grand référendum. Et mon père a dit qu'il ne peut pas rester dans un pays qui renie le sauveur de la France. Parce que mon père, c'était une figure…c'était une figure trouble parce que…c'était un héros en même temps, c'est ça qui est…l'ambivalence, toute l'ambivalence est là. Un héros, il a 17 ans. Moi je l'ai souvent dépeint comme un héros. Dans l'exil selon Julia, on le retrouve. Voilà c'est une figure, même dans notre famille. Et en même temps, ce côté plus sombre, plus…

Parce que son père faisait quoi ?

Son père, c'était un agriculteur qui avait fait la guerre aussi.

Et il venait d'où en Guadeloupe ?

De Capesterre Belle eaux. De Routier de Capesterre Belles eau. Et il descendait. Alors ça c'était encore un…ahh il était horrible ! Celui-là battait ma grand-mère Julia, c'est pour ça que mon père la fait venir. Et mon grand-père, il était tellement moche. On dirait que toute sa méchanceté était inscrite sur son visage, sa dégaine, sa figure…Enfin peut être moi je le voyais si moche parce que ma grand-mère Man Ya, ça était pour moi une bouée de sauvetage, ça était de l'amour à l'état brut. Ca était quelqu'un qui m'a enveloppé. Et donc, quand je voyais ce grand père avec toutes ses décorations de la première guerre mondiale…avec ses vieux costumes qui étaient trop larges aux épaules et sa ceinture attachée…Et donc ma grand-mère Julia, Man Ya, il faut la voir aussi à cette époque-là dans cet appartement, avec les filles, les lits superposés. Et moi tous les soirs, je vais dormir dans les bras de Man Ya, dans le lit de Man Ya. Je suis avec elle et je la supplie de me raconter la Guadeloupe, comment c'est comment ? puisque je ne connais pas.

Et je suis arrivée en Guadeloupe quand j'avais 14 ans, la 2ème fois. Le 1er passage après le séjour au Congo, dans les années 60 ; et âpres on reste 10 ans et c'est en 70 qu'on va en Guadeloupe parce que

En Martinique ?

En Martinique mais aussi en Guadeloupe parce que nous sommes partis pendant les vacances scolaires, nous avons fait un saut en Guadeloupe, j'ai retrouvé ma grand-mère Julia

Ah oui parce qu'elle, elle était repartie en 69...

Elle était repartie en 69, elle avait fait une forme de dépression, est-ce que c'est le mot je ne sais pas…En tout cas, elle a dit qu'elle doit retourner auprès de son mari, elle est mariée devant Dieu. Il faut qu'elle retourne. Donc les médecins ont dit que c'était de la dépression, moi je dis que c'était une grève de la faim. Et donc elle m'avait dit, on va se retrouver, on va se retrouver. Et donc, voilà. Et j'aime bien dire que c'est à cause de ses prières que le général De Gaulle a été évincé du pouvoir (rire), enfin qu'il ait abandonné le pouvoir, pour que nous, nous puissions retourner en Guadeloupe, parce que c'était vraiment mon désir le plus profond, être dans un pays où il y a des noirs, où je suis acceptée, où je suis acceptée, où je peux vivre normalement. Sans qu'on voit une négresse qu'on va insulter. Voilà c'est ça qui était insupportable. Quand je grimpais à la corde, je me souviens, je les entends encore. Je monte à la corde, vous imaginez, il y a le professeur, et moi je suis assez contente parce que je me dis voilà je vais montrer que je…j'entends, c'est normal, c'est un singe. Et le professeur ne dit rien.

Ahhhhh

Le professeur ne dit rien Elise. Et qu'est-ce que j'ai envie de faire quand je suis arrivée là-haut, j'ai envie de me jetter, tomber et mourir. Et j'ai été aussi, je me souviens c'était en 68, et bien j'avais un professeur qui me faisait entrer sous son bureau, je le raconte cela d'ailleurs dans l'exil selon Julia et j'ai mis le vrai nom du professeur Madame Baron parce qu'elle ne veut pas voir ma tête de négresse, alors moi je me dis qu'aujourd'hui est-ce que ça peut exister ça, est-ce que des enfants vont être témoins de ça, une petite fille qui est là, qui ne dit rien, dans son coin. Est-ce qu'aujourd'hui des enfants vont accepter ça sans le dire à leurs parents ? sans qu'il n'y ait de manifestation, sans que ce professeur ne soit vraiment interpellé ? Là rien. Professeur c'est un singe, le professeur ne dit rien. Donc voilà,

Ohlala

Mais, mais Elise, aujourd'hui je remercie ces enfants qui m'ont permis de …c'était une épreuve à traverser, qui m'ont permis de me construire. Il fallait que je me débrouille dans ce marasme, il fallait que je traverse cette…c'est comme une

mangrove que je devais traverser. Et puis j'ai trouvé en moi, puisque tous les mots étaient en moi, puisque les expériences, tout ce que je raconte, ça sort de mon imagination. Tout ce que j'ai inventé pour me consoler, pour me consoler, **pour donner du sens aux choses aussi.**

Donc le premier roman que vous avez écrit à 10 ans relate votre expérience ?

Mon premier roman c'est un roman qui ressemble beaucoup à *Un papillon dans la cité*. C'est une petite fille mais super, et puis qui connaît d'ailleurs l'expérience de l'exil. Si vous avez lu un peu mes livres, vous allez retrouver ce thème, parce qu'un écrivain écrit toujours le même livre. Vous allez retrouver ce thème de l'exil.

(…)

Les personnages, tous mes personnages dans tous mes romans se construisent grâce à l'expérience, aux épreuves qu'ils vont traverser, et tout ce qu'ils vont rencontrer sur leur route. Ils vont se construire et c'est la solitude aussi, c'est tout seul. On va se construire mais tout seul. Au bout du compte, on va traverser comme Ulysse, on va traverser mais il y aura des monstres, il y aura des sirènes, il y aura des cyclopes et puis il y aura une mer démontée. Et on va arriver quoi. Il y a toujours quand même de l'espoir. Et souvent mes lecteurs me disent, oui Madame Pineau, vous écrivez des choses terribles, je dis oui mais il y a au moins trois pages d'espoir à la fin. Effectivement, mais on accompagne l'héroïne ou le personnage principal, on l'accompagne comme ça, on est avec ce personnage, on est tout près de son souffle, on est tout près de de…de son cœur qui palpite. Mais il arrive, il va quelque part, il va quelque part. Et il traverse pour grandir, pour se construire, pour se comprendre, pour accepter aussi que le passé, l'enfance, n'est pas le lieu, n'est pas ce territoire où il doit errer en permanence. Il doit abandonner, arrêter de se poser en victime. Il doit laisser ça parce que ce passé là il ne peut pas le changer. C'est ça aussi, vraiment c'est ce qu'on retrouve dans mes livres.

D'accord. Est-ce que quand vous construisez un personnage, vous savez déjà où il va aboutir ?

Pas tout à fait, pas tout à fait. C'est très vague mais j'accepte ce flou, ce flou artistique. J'accepte et je suis même, comme dire, affamée de vivre ça, d'être dans ce flou parce que c'est très excitant. Je sais pas vraiment mais je fais confiance. J'ai écrit un seul roman où j'avais un plan. J'avais justement un professeur de français que j'avais rencontré qui m'avait dit, mais tu sais ton roman, ce n'est pas un roman, il faut faire un plan, voilà ce que c'est qu'un roman. Il m'avait expliqué ce que c'était qu'un roman. J'avais dit, bon je vais essayer. Je me suis ennuyée comme pas possible. Là quand j'écris des romans, je suis réellement comme le peintre devant sa toile blanche. J'ai une idée de quelque chose, une intuition, beaucoup d'intuitions. Mais je sais pas vraiment ce que ça va donner, je sais pas où je vais aller. Donc à chaque fois, chaque matin, quand je me pose à ma table de travail, je dis bon ben on va voir ce qui va se

passer aujourd'hui. Et puis bon j'y vais. C'est comme si j'allais faire une promenade et puis je vais, ahh, déboucher sur quelque chose d'incroyable. Alors je veux me surprendre moi-même, je me laisse surprendre en tout cas par ce qui surgit. Et ça c'est ça pour moi l'écriture. Donc Elise, vous avez vu, j'écris beaucoup à partir de ma propre histoire, énormément, énormément. Et là, j'avance, mais je ne sais pas, je ne veux pas écrire de livres inutiles, je ne veux pas écrire le livre de trop. Alors, je crois qu'il y a eu plusieurs cycles, dans ce que j'ai fait, dans ce que j'ai écrit et peut être on en parlera tout à l'heure.

Oui, oui. Mais en tout cas donc, entre le 1er roman que vous avez écrit à 10 ans et le 1 er roman que vous avez publié, à 37 ans…

Oui il y en a eu d'autres entre temps.

Voilà c'est ce que je me demandais…comment l'écriture est venue, en fonction de votre parcours. Parce que bon…

Oui, bien sûr. Alors Elise, un premier livre à 10 ans, qui a disparu dans les déménagements. Mais j'ai toujours continué à écrire. Nous sommes partis à la Martinique, j'ai toujours continué à écrire. En fait dans ma famille, j'étais celle qui écrit des petites histoires sur le coin de la table.

Et votre frère faisait des dessins.

Oui mon frère dessinait, il faisait les dessins de couverture de mes livres. Il avait du talent, il a laissé tomber, je sais pas…

Mais sinon vous étiez la seule à écrire ?

La seule. Et même à lire ! Mon père, mon père ce héros, il voulait que ses enfants soient instruits. Il achetait des encyclopédies. Il achetait des auteurs français classiques. Tout était là. J'avais des murs d'encyclopédies.

D'accord, donc quand vous êtes enfant.

Enfant, il y a les livres à la maison. Et moi je me passionne.

Les livres de littérature classique

Il y avait tout, il y avait Zola, le théâtre il y avait Corneille. Balzac, il y avait vraiment waow, toute la poésie. Et il y avait les encyclopédies. J'aimais avoir le poids de ces livres, très très lourd sur les genoux comme ça. Et apprendre, un, deux mots nouveaux chaque jour, feuilleter les pages, j'aime ça. J'en ai acheté, j'ai des encyclopédies, parce que c'est une partie de mon enfance aussi qui est pleine de lumière, parce qu'il y avait cette ouverture sur la culture, des histoires sur la mythologie. Tout était là.

Par contre est-ce qu'il y avait la littérature…parce que vous dites que vous avez été influencée par Richard Wright et après plus tard, Simone Schwarz Bart, Jacques Roumain…

Jacques Roumain. Oui, c'était un peu les classiques.

Est-ce que quand vous étiez enfant, il faisait parti de la bibliothèque…ou comment vous les avez découvert ? Toni Morrisson aussi

Ah Oui, bien sûr. Alors quand j'étais enfant…c'était Zola. Je dois dire c'était Zola

Mais Zola, c'était chez vous, pas à l'école.

C'était chez moi. On avait les livres. C'étaient des livres reliés, brochés. Et Zola, ben je me reconnaissais parce que c'était la misère, c'était le combat pour sortir de la misère. Et puis Victor Hugo aussi bien sûr, mais Zola. Après, la littérature américaine, je ne sais pas comment…les Richard Wright, peut-être parce que …je ne sais pas comment c'est arrivé à la maison. Mais l'enfant noir, je l'ai lu je me souviens, c'était dans cet appartement et je l'ai quitté quand j'avais 14 ans. Je sais pas comment il est arrivée là. Il y avait aussi les contes et légendes des Antilles. Pas Simone Schwarz Bart tout de suite. SSB c'est quand je suis arrivée en Guadeloupe. Et puis elle-même, est-ce qu'elle avait déjà …non Son livre est dans les années 70.

Et les auteurs haïtiens, Jacques Roumain ?

Jacques Roumain, oui c'est un peu un incontournable, comme Joseph Zobel aussi.

Et ils étaient chez vous quand vous étiez jeune ?

Non, quand je suis arrivée en Martinique. Jacques Roumain, « Gouverneur de la rosée », c'était le livre que tous les antillais lisaient. « Gouverneur de la rosée » c'est un chef d'œuvre.

Oui c'est un chef d'œuvre.

Et puis voilà, c'était un livre de référence, un livre de combat, un livre de résistance et puis de gens qui prennent leur vie en main, de leader.

Parce que votre père ne lisait pas trop les poètes de la négritude j'imagine…

Non, non, on a pas… Et puis je parlais tout à l'heure de la langue créole. Elle était parlée uniquement par ma grand-mère qui elle ne connaissait pas le français. Mais, mes parents voulaient, nos parents voulaient que l'on soit instruit, qu'on évolue. Je crois qu'être militaire de carrière pour mon père c'était une promotion sociale aussi, le

port de l'uniforme, l'armée française, vivre en France. Ma mère, elle adorait dire ça, « la France, la France ».

Oui alors elle, ses parents faisaient quoi et venaient d'où ?

Mon grand-père maternel était géreur sur une habitation sucrière. Il y a une histoire de fortune, de jalousie, de sorcellerie. A un moment donné, il a tout perdu. Ma grand-mère, elle a eu une boutique, elle a tenu une boutique dans le bourg de Goyave en Guadeloupe. Et puis à un moment donné, ça c'est la mythologie familiale, on raconte que, à cause de la jalousie, tous les produits, les sacs de riz ont commencé à être mangé par les vers. Elle a perdu toutes ses marchandises et puis un jour ma mère me raconte, que elle s'est retrouvé avec sa maman sous un manguier et ma grand-mère maternelle leur a donné trois mangues vertes à manger, parce qu'il n'y avait plus rien, c'était la misère. C'est comme ça qu'elles ont quitté Goyave pour fuir en même temps la jalousie, la sorcellerie. Et puis ils sont arrivés à Capesterre.

D'accord donc une famille qui avait un peu des moyens et qui après a tout perdu.

Voilà. Elle était considérée dans son petit village de Goyave avec sa famille, comme une aristocrate. Ma mère, c'est une mulâtresse, une mulâtresse. Donc c'est toujours cette peau claire, la peau très claire, et puis les « beaux » cheveux, les beaux cheveux, je mets des guillemet. On dit beaux cheveux. Et ma mère elle a épousé ce grand nègre.

Parce que son père était blanc ?

Non c'était un chabin, on dit chabin, très clair. Et ma grand-mère c'est une mulâtresse. Il faut imaginer, vous savez aux Etats-Unis les femmes indiennes, vraiment avec les longs cheveux épais. Elle était comme ça, la peau tannée, Et donc ma mère est sortie très très très claire. Ma mère, elle est claire comme ça. Et donc elle, on l'appelait l'aristocrate dans son village. Et d'ailleurs mon grand-père maternel ne s'est pas présenté au mariage de mes parents. Il a refusé qu'elle épouse ce nègre. Parce que mon grand-père très moche-là, il faisait peur à tout le monde, il n'avait pas une bonne réputation. Il n'avait pas une bonne réputation. Donc mon grand-père paternel, il ne voulait pas que sa fille. Il disait pourquoi tu vas te marier avec cet homme, ce garçon, c'est pas des gens bien. Et donc elle a épousé cet homme pour le prestige de l'uniforme, pour le voyage, pour les possibilités …

Et non pour le prestige de entre guillement « la couleur de la peau »

Et non, mais en même temps, sa peau noire s'effaçait derrière le prestige de l'uniforme.

Et elle, votre mère a fait des études ?

Non. Elle est allée peut-être, je sais pas, petit certificat, à peine.

Et votre grand-mère non plus ?

Ma grand-mère maternelle ?

Oui

Non. Mais c'est des gens qui savaient lire.

Et votre autre grand-mère ?

Non elle a fait peut-être deux trois jours d'école

Ah oui oui oui.

Non, elle était complètement illettrée, elle travaillait dans les champs de canne. Mais ça ne veut rien dire, parce que c'était elle la grande dame en fin de compte. C'était elle la grande dame, qui a pu nous transmettre le pays avec une histoire. Parce que ce que ma mère était incapable de faire…je sais pas si vous connaissez cette anecdote. Un jour à la télévision française, pendant ces années 60, je vois un documentaire sur l'esclavage. Et je vois une colonie de noirs, enchainés, nus avec des chaines... Et je dis à ma mère, maman mais qu'est-ce que c'est ? Et je vois que ce sont des gens qui me ressemblent. Il y a si peu de noirs qui passent déjà à la télévision. Là quand je vois des noirs, je les vois enchainés, nus. Ma mère me dit non c'est rien, c'est le passé. Et ma grand-mère Julia qui me dit en créole, et bien c'est ça, nous aussi on vient de là, de l'Afrique. C'est ce que sa grand-mère lui avait raconté, elle me le restitue. Elle me dit qu'on était esclave, que nos ancêtres ont traversé par les bateaux.

Oui oui, elle vous explique.

Elle explique ça. Et donc, c'est elle qui me donne le pays, l'histoire du pays. Elle qui me donne la langue, la langue parce que ma mère ne parle qu'en français à ses enfants. Mais c'était de l'ignorance de la part de…c'était parce que c'était comme ça. Beaucoup de migrants, quand ils arrivent dans le pays d'accueil, et bien ils veulent donner le meilleur à leurs enfants. Donc ils bannissent leur langue, surtout si ils considèrent que leur langue est un patois ; encore quand c'est une langue prestigieuse, mais là un patois, c'est la langue des vieux nègres. C'est ça la langue créole à l'époque, la langue des habitations. C'est ce qu'on dit.

Oui il y a une représentation très négative

Très négative des gens qui ne savent pas parler le français.

Non instruit

Voilà, illettrés, des couillons. Et donc ils veulent que leurs enfants parlent le français. Mais ma grand-mère, elle était un élément comme dans un jeu d'échec, c'était une pièce maitresse. Une pièce maitresse, qui était là, qui disait rien. Mais elle était là pour mettre le désordre dans cette organisation avec mon père. Mon père voulait que tout soit organisé. Mais pendant ce temps-là, elle nous transmettait les choses, la langue créole, l'amour qu'on a reçu, l'amour qu'on a reçu, le sentiment d'être aimé, d'être aimé. C'est ma grand-mère, c'est ma grand-mère. Je raconte dans l'exil selon Julia, quand elle nous réveillait la nuit, elle nous réveillait la nuit quand on avait été privé de dessert pour nous donner une pomme.

Oui et quand elle vient à l'école avec le parapluie

Le parapluie et le costume militaire. Mais c'était vrai, et on se dit waow, elle est prête à vaincre tout…parce qu'elle transgresse l'autorité. Nos parents nous ont privé de dessert mais elle attend qu'ils soient couchés : « ti moun, ti moun, … ? ti pomme France » ça c'est de la tendresse, de l'amour et ça on le sent. On le sent, vraiment, vraiment, vraiment. C'est merveilleux d'avoir eu ça, moi je lui suis vraiment reconnaissante.

Et les histoires qu'elle vous racontait vous vous rappelez ?

Ah oui ohlala, mais les diablesses, les soucougnans, c'est elle qui nous raconte tout ça, dans son lit, dans son odeur. Et puis les prières aussi, le sentiment d'appartenance aussi. Mais tu as un pays. Quand je lui disais, mais on me traite de …elle disait mais tu vas retourner. La confiance, la confiance de savoir, tu vas retourner un jour. C'est pour ça que j'aime bien dire que c'est grâce à elle qu'il y a eu Mai 68, que la France a pété de partout. Parce que la grand-mère qui veut que ses petits-enfants la rejoignent et voilà (rire). Bien sûr c'est une boutade. Et aussi ce que j'ai appris avec ma grand-mère et que je raconte puisque vous avez lu « L'exil selon Julia », comment on peut se sentir en même temps victime des préjugés, parce que moi je me positionnais comme... Mais moi j'étais plein de préjugés vis à vis de cette vieille femme négresse de Guadeloupe, puisqu'elle ne sait pas lire. J'ai l'impression que je la domine aussi, que je suis plus intelligente que j'ai un pouvoir, le pouvoir de lui dire mais c'est facile. Quand je lui apprends à écrire son prénom, ce pouvoir-là. Donc ma grand-mère m'a appris l'humilité. Parce que j'arrive en Guadeloupe quand j'ai 14 ans, j'ai 14 ans en 1970, les premières vacances en Guadeloupe, on revient dans notre terroir, et moi je regarde les arbres. Elise, quand vous regardez les arbres, vous connaissez tous ces arbres-là ?

Certain

Certain. Mais moi, à 14 ans, je me suis retrouvée dans cette nature guadeloupéenne comme une illettrée, comme l'illétrée que ma grand-mère avait été quand elle était face aux lettres. Moi face à la nature guadeloupéenne, j'étais une illettrée. Je ne sais pas ce que c'est que cet arbre-là. Je ne connais pas les arbres, et donc

Oui vous aviez grandi en ville

Mais j'ai grandi, il y avait des pelouses, des pelouses interdites, on a pas le droit de marcher. Des arbres qui ne portent pas de fruit. Et c'est ma grand-mère Julia, Man Ya qui m'apprend, m'apprend, sans prétention, sans me narguer, sans ironie ; qui m'apprend à reconnaître, à préparer le cacao, puisqu'elle vendait des bâtons de cacao. Elle avait un jardin extraordinaire. C'est pour cela que j'ai voulu reproduire un jardin. On ira le visiter si vous voulez.

Oui, oui bien sûr.

Et le cacao, le café, comment le faire griller, comment féconder la vanille, cueillir les prunes citère, monter dans les arbres. Elle avait une rivière qui coulait derrière sa maison. Elle m'a donné un cours accéléré pour reprendre ma place dans le pays, me positionner ; et puis la langue créole, manger créole. Mes frères et sœurs aimaient bien rester au Bourg chez ma grand-mère maternelle avec ma mère. Et moi je demandais de m'emmener à Routier, Routier c'est sur un flanc de la soufrière en montant dans la montagne, pas vraiment de la soufrière mais de la montagne comme ça, à Capesterre belle eaux. Et c'est les bois, c'est merveilleux, c'est merveilleux. C'est dense, c'est dense.

Oui oui surtout la Basse Terre

La Basse terre, c'est la Basse Terre. Donc c'est ce contexte là avec le sentiment très fort Elise de toujours être un peu à côté des choses, à côté des gens, parce que quand j'étais en France, en France j'étais la négresse et surtout à cet époque-là, les seuls noirs que je voyais dans la cour de récréation c'était mes frères et sœurs, les seuls noirs, il n'y en avait pas d'autre. Donc avec ma grand-mère, je prie, je prie pour retourner en Guadeloupe. Alors on va en Martinique, mais c'est tout près la Guadeloupe. Quand j'arrive, parmi les miens soi-disant, j'arrive parmi les noirs, et bien je suis encore différente. Mais c'est ça le jeu en fait. Parce que c'est un truc qui n'a pas de fin, parce que finalement tu es toujours l'étranger de quelqu'un, tu es toujours dans ta différence et dans ta solitude. Donc je me retrouve la négresse qui se prend pour une blanche, je me retrouve Bounti, je me retrouve « négropolitaine ». Je me retrouve : pour qui tu te prends, tu te prends pour une blanche, parce que je roule les r quand je parle le français, parce que je ne comprends pas tout ce qui se dit en créole. Mais cette fois ci, j'accepte ; j'accepte cela parce que je me dis voilà, je dois mériter. Mais c'est tout un cheminement mental. Parce que là, d'accord j'étais pas chez moi en France. Je vais dans un pays de noirs, de mes parents, mes grands-parents. Et bien il faut que je m'adapte, il faut que je me fasse accepter. C'est pas évident de se faire accepter. Parce qu'en même temps, on ne peut pas acheter l'amitié des gens, parce qu'ils vont sentir que vous essayez de leur faire plaisir. Il faut rester quand même à sa place, mais c'est très difficile, on est un peu en train de jongler. Où tu étais ? Ah bon tu roules les r. Et puis on est pris entre l'envie d'aller vers ce que l'on connaît, d'aller vers les enfants

blancs de l'école. Elise, est-ce que vous comprenez ce que je veux dire ? Peut-être que cela était mes bourreaux ailleurs en France

Vous aviez finalement peut-être plus de points communs ?

Exactement Elise. Mais je me reconnais, dans les manières, dans les jeux et en même temps…c'était un brassage. Mais c'est ce qui est passionnant, parce que c'est la vie aussi tout ça, parce que tout le temps on doit relever des défis en permanence. Et voilà comment je grandis,

Donc vous faites le lycée …

Le lycée, je me retrouve dans une école, une école privée à Basse Terre, le pensionnat Saint Joseph de Cluny avec l'uniforme.

Donc en Guadeloupe après.

En Guadeloupe. En 4ème je me retrouve en Guadeloupe, parce que mes parents ne veulent pas me faire démarrer une année scolaire, me couper parce que le départ de mon père ne se faisait pas pendant une période scolaire

Mais vous aviez vécu en Martinique ?

Oui en 4ème. Et je suis très vite mise en pension chez des parents à Basse Terre pour aller à l'école. Puis je continue ma scolarité jusqu'au bac littéraire. Et après je pars en France pour devenir professeur de lettres, parce que j'ai…je pensais que c'était la voie de la facilité, je suis toujours passionnée de littérature, j'écris beaucoup, je veux devenir écrivain aussi, pas seulement être prof. Mais pour moi, c'est la solution de facilité. C'est la solution de facilité ? Non ?

Ben je sais pas

C'est ce que j'aime. C'est ce que j'aime, je me vois pas faire autre chose. Je suis brillante, j'ai des bonnes notes en français. Je peux devenir professeur de lettre non. Et puis j'arrive à Nanterre et on me dit Latin ; latin, linguistique, ancien français. J'ai pas envie.
(…) Je me retrouvais avec des étudiants qui pratiquaient le latin depuis la 6ème. J'ai eu mon deug, mais à l'époque c'était des unités de valeur, les uv. Après la License, j'ai dit que je veux pas continuer à bluffer les gens avec un latin, non. Et donc je me suis dit qu'est-ce que je vais faire. Et c'est là que ma route croise celle d'un garçon qui va passer l'oral pour intégrer l'école d'infirmier en psychiatrie. Et voilà comment mon destin bascule. Mais je continuais à écrire. Et là j'ai gagné en autonomie parce qu'il y avait un salaire tout de suite.

(…)

J'ai jamais joué à l'infirmière, j'avais peur du sang

Ohh mais comme vous avez fait alors ?

Non mais c'est pas pareil, la psychiatrie c'est pas pareil, c'est une petite prise de sang ; les pansements, c'est un petit peu mais…mais c'est la tête, c'est la tête, la souffrance qu'on ne voit pas, qui n'est pas écrit sur le visage, c'est des êtres torturés, habités, qui ont des mondes en eux, qui… c'est exactement ce qui me fallait, exactement ce qui me fallait. Et ce métier m'a donné un équilibre, parce que tu vois, si j'avais été seulement une écrivaine, je crois que j'aurais perdu le contact avec la réalité. C'est ce métier d'infirmière en psychiatrie qui m'a permis de rester ancrée et puis d'être auprès des gens et de l'être humain et d'être vraiment au plus près de l'humain. Et ça a équilibré ma vie à plusieurs titres, tu vois. Parce que grâce à ce métier d'infirmière, tu vois, j'ai pu consacrer du temps à l'écriture. Parce que il y a des brigades, ce qu'on appelle des brigades, il y a des infirmières qui commencent à 6 heures du matin et qui termine à 14h. Il y a l'équipe d'après-midi qui arrive 14h-22h. Donc moi j'ai longtemps travaillé de nuit, pendant 14 ans en Guadeloupe, de nuit. Donc j'écrivais la nuit. Tu dois rester éveillée la nuit. J'écrivais la nuit. Je dormais l'après-midi un peu et puis mes enfants, je m'occupais d'eux. Je faisais à manger, ils n'ont jamais mangé à la cantine. Ouai quand même j'ai réussi. Après je suis partie en France, j'ai travaillé que les après-midis.

D'accord.

Donc hop, tous les matins, écriture, jusqu'à 13h. Après, je vois 13h, je me prépare pour arriver à 14h au boulot. Et donc waow, quel luxe d'avoir ce temps pour toi, tout ce temps pour toi ; de 6h du matin à …c'est comme une journée de travail déjà. Et puis l'après-midi, je suis vraiment avec mes patients. Je ne suis pas en train de penser aux personnages, il va passer par quelle porte, non pas du tout. Et puis le soir, je sors avec mes amis, je vais au cinéma. Parce qu'on terminait vers 21h, 22h. Et ce métier, c'était vraiment pour moi.

Et ça a permis de bien équilibrer écriture/vie professionnelle

Bien équilibrée

Et en même temps de vous nourrir

Oui de me nourrir, d'approfondir et d'aller de plus en plus loin dans la perception psychologique des personnages, dans toutes les subtilités, les petites choses très très fines hein. Tu vois comme je te racontais comment voilà, l'arrogance de l'enfant en tant que professeur avec ma grand-mère, maitresse d'école ; tu sais pas écrire ça, mais c'est facile écoute mais il faut mieux former tes lettres. Et puis après tu débarques dans un pays où tu es une illettrée à ton tour. Mais c'est amusant, c'est amusant. Voilà,

on peut se regarder comme ça et se dire, ouai tu fais ton cinéma là aussi. Mais on apprend beaucoup.

D'accord. Et donc vous avez fait la formation à Paris…

A Villejuif

Et après vous êtes rentrée en Guadeloupe

Oui je suis rentrée en Guadeloupe en …80. Je suis rentrée à l'école en 77, j'ai eu mon diplôme. Je suis repartie tout de suite, j'étais enceinte de mon fils. Il est né en 1980.

Ah et vous étiez mariée ?

Oui j'étais mariée.

Avec un guadeloupéen ?

Un Martiniquais

Ah un Martiniquais. Et vous avez habité en Guadeloupe…

On a habité pendant 20 ans. J'ai habité 20 ans à Capesterre de 80 à 2000. Et en 2000, je suis repartie en France. Et ouhlala je me suis fait embauchée dans un hôpital psychiatrique. J'ai travaillé là jusqu'en 2009. Et en 2009 je suis revenue ici et j'ai travaillé jusqu'en 2013. Puis j'ai pris ma retraite. (…)

Donc c'était un rêve d'habiter à Marie-Galante…

Ah oui c'était mon rêve.

Et pourquoi Marie-Galante ?

Je crois que c'était une île qui ressemble à ma grand-mère Julia, qui m'enveloppe. C'est très rural

Juste une précision. Votre mari, il faisait quelle profession ?

Il était infirmier en psychiatrie. Je l'ai rencontré à Villejuif, Martiniquais.

D'accord et vous avez eu deux enfants ?

Deux enfants, un garçon et une fille

Et ils font quoi maintenant ?

Et ben mon fils il écrit d'ailleurs, il écrit mais du SLAM et de la poésie. Il vient de publier. Et ma fille elle est professeur d'école.

Ah d'accord. Elle y est arrivée (rire)

Elle a réussi, elle est professeur (rire), le fameux titre !

Et ils sont en Guadeloupe ?

En Guadeloupe oui. Professeur !

Et donc pourquoi vous repartez en France ?

Oui parce qu'il fallait rompre avec mon ex-mari, c'était très difficile. Je suis partie, j'ai abandonné le foyer, j'ai tout laissé. Je suis partie avec mes enfants. On est parti en France. En fait ma fille, elle était à La Réunion chez une de ses amis, et au lieu de revenir en Guadeloupe on s'est donné rdv en France. Mon fils, il était parti, parce qu'il s'installait pour faire une école, et du coup je me suis dit, je ne peux pas me retrouver en tête à tête avec mon mari. Je peux pas, c'était plus possible. Et donc j'ai décidé de partir parce que c'était très tendu et tout. Parce que lui il avait épousé une infirmière…

Et vous avez divorcé ?

Oui, oui.
En 2000, je décide de partir. Je m'installe à Paris avec mes enfants. Et donc je fais des pieds, des mains pour avoir un boulot. Et donc je suis recrutée à l'hôpital Esquirol. Ils m'ont repris avec tous mes échelons. Et puis je trouve un appartement à Paris. J'inscris mes enfants, et puis voilà la vie continue…jusqu'en 2009.

Oui oui. Et là vous décidez de revenir ici…

Oui mais je venais tous les …au moins 3 ou 4 fois par an, je venais ici, notamment pour chercher un terrain ici, un terrain que j'ai acheté en 2005. Et puis j'ai fait construire ma maison ici. Et je suis heureuse parce que voilà j'aime cette terre, j'aime cette île, les dimensions de cette île, tous les gens se tutoient facilement. Je ne sais pas si tu as remarqué, les gens ils tutoient, ils tutoient. On se salue. Moi j'aime beaucoup cette île, elle est très chaleureuse !

Alors, passons aux publications. Donc votre premier roman, La grande drive des esprits, en 1993 aux Serpents à plumes…

Mais avant ça…la 1ère publication Elise ! Alors, j'écris, j'écris. J'écris des romans, j'écris des romans. Il y a 400 pages. Et à l'époque, il y a pas d'ordinateur, donc c'est

des machines à ruban. J'écris, je veux devenir écrivain. Je suis infirmière mais j'écris, je continue. J'écris, c'est mon but dans la vie, je suis mariée…

Mais vous n'envoyez pas pour publier ?

Si bien sûr j'envoie mais ça m'est retourné. ça revient.

En quelle année vous avez commencé à envoyer ? enfin plus ou moins

Euh… 82. 82 parce qu'en fait pour moi, il fallait que à 30 ans. 30 ans, il fallait que je puisse voilà publier un livre. Et donc à un moment donnée, j'écris, bon j'envoie aux éditeurs parisiens : Grasset, Seuil, Gallimard. Pour moi, c'est là, c'est là que je dois envoyer. Je veux pas être publier à compte d'auteur parce que je me dis c'est trop facile, il faut qu'un éditeur croit en toi. C'est ça, je suis pas dans la complaisance à ce niveau là. Et donc j'envoie, on me renvoie les manuscrits.

Est-ce qu'ils expliquent pourquoi ils ne prennent pas ?

Alors il y a Simone Gallimard qui m'a fait une grande lettre un jour, qui m'a dit qu'elle sent qu'il y a quelque chose ; elle m'a donné quelques indications comme ça, que j'ai suivi. Et j'ai écrit « La Grande Drive des Esprits ». Mais avant ça, alors j'ai écrit « La grande drive des esprits ». Grande drive des Esprits refusée, j'envoie, c'est refusé par les éditeurs, toujours les mêmes. Et puis il y a le Serpent à Plume qui a l'époque avait une revue de nouvelles, vous connaissez ça, une revue de nouvelles du monde entier. Et il y avait ben des revues par thèmes, par pays. Donc voilà le Serpent à Plumes. Mais moi j'avais participé à un concours de nouvelles, organisées déjà en Guadeloupe et j'ai eu le 1er prix. C'est un livre qui existe qui s'appelle « Paroles de terre en larmes » . Vous n'avez jamais vu ? J'ai le 1er prix , c'est au niveau de la Guadeloupe. Les écrivaines qui sont les marraines de cet événement bien sûr, Maryse Condé, Simone Schwarz-Bart. Il y a une grande soirée au niveau du département, où je suis honorée. Mais il y a eu un jury qui a choisi. Ils ont reçu 187 nouvelles. Et la récompense, c'était la publication aux éditions Hatier.

Et ça c'était en quelle année ?

87. Donc 1ère publication. Et donc là, le titre du recueil porte le nom de la nouvelle qui a reçu le prix. Donc ça s'appelle « Paroles de terres en larmes ». C'était ma nouvelle. En fait j'en avais envoyé trois, parce que c'était de façon anonyme. J'en ai envoyé trois et les trois ont été retenues pour le recueil. Alors là j'ai dit, ah quand même il y a des professionnels qui me disent continue, c'est un encouragement, bien sûr. Et après ça, je suis contactée par Raphael Confiant, et Ralph Ludwig, parce que ça y est mon nom apparaît. Il me dit bon, est-ce que vous avez une nouvelle ? Et je prends un chapitre de « La grande drive », qui m'avait été refusée, qui m'était revenue, et je l'envoie pour publication au Seuil je crois. Et donc je l'envoie. Après, le Serpent à Plumes avec son édition de nouvelles, oui Gisèle Pineau, est-ce que vous avez une

nouvelle pour notre recueil de Caraïbe, destinée aux Caraïbes ? Je dis ah bon. Elle me dit, oui oui il y aura Glissant, Chamoiseau. Alors moi je suis vraiment dans un autre monde-là. Et j'ai dit, bien sûr que j'ai une nouvelle, bien sûr. Je cherche un chapitre de la Grande drive, je change le début pour que cela raconte une histoire, un chapitre, publié, publié. (…) Et Pierre Astier qui est le directeur du Serpent à Plumes me dit, ah Gisèle, maintenant nous allons publier des romans, des livres. Donc est-ce que tu aurais un livre ? Je lui dis ah oui, j'ai un livre, et justement je voulais te faire part d'une petite information. Euh je t'ai envoyé un chapitre qui a été publié déjà dans ton recueil de nouvelles. Il me dit ah bon ? et en fait j'envoie « La Grande drive des esprits » qui est publié. C'est le 1er livre qui est publié par les éditions par le Serpent à Plumes. Et nous obtenons avec ce livre le grand prix des lectrices de Elle et le prix Carbet de la Caraïbe qui est présidé par Edouard Glissant, en 93. Donc là c'est vraiment…

Le début, le Grand début !

Le grand début. Mais moi j'ai toujours envoyé mes livres par la poste comme ça, et les portes se sont ouvertes. Et le concours, parce qu'il y a eu une seule édition de ce concours, c'était un concours qui s'appelait écriture d'îles et il n'y a pas eu d'autres éditions. Et des fois je revoie les membres du jury et je leur dis où sont les autres qu'est-ce qu'ils ont fait ? les gens n'ont pas continué…donc je suis contente, tu vois là c'était ma voie. Et donc voilà comment j'ai été publiée pour la 1ère fois. Après on a eu des dissensions avec le Serpent à Plumes et j'ai signé chez Stock, aux éditions Stocks. Donc j'ai signé chez Stock, j'ai eu pas mal de prix.

Oui chaque roman est suivi d'un prix

Oui c'était très agréable

Et donc chez Stock, vous signez un contrat pour un roman ou plusieurs romans ? comment ça se passe ?

C'était pour un, je sais plus…deux ou trois je crois. Mais ça c'est …oui deux ou trois. Alors c'était « L'esperance macadam », « L'exil selon Julia » et « L'arbre prête aux oiseaux » et « Femmes des antilles, traces et voix ». (…) Et là mon projet. Comment j'ai voulu…alors c'était les commémorations des 150 ans de l'abolition de l'esclavage en 98. Qu'est-ce qu'ils vont dire, ils vont parler de l'esclave, ça va être un personnage, une ombre comme ça, l'esclave, l'esclave ; je voulais qu'il y ait des voix, je voulais qu'on imagine, qu'il y ait des personnes, c'était ce qui m'intéressait, c'était de montrer des femmes. Parce que je me suis dit, bon moi je ne suis pas professeur d'histoire, mais je suis un écrivain, je dois faire quelque chose. (…)
Donc c'était important pour moi de me manifester, de ne pas rester dans un silence, de ne pas rester en retrait, et de laisser parler les grands pontes, les historiens, ce qui connaissent, ceux qui savent. J'ai voulu ramener les choses à l'humain, et puis à ce qui peut aussi toucher un lecteur, toucher une personne, un être humain. Qui se dit ah bon,

quand on lit une histoire, quand on donne un nom à une histoire, à des personnages ; on sort du rationnel et du cérébral pour rentrer dans l'émotionnel, dans la chair même de ce qui nous fait vibrer quoi ! Une personne c'est arrivé à une personne ! C'est un être humain, un être humain. Parce qu'on voit ces gens marcher, comme ça, une colonie razziée en Afrique, mais quand on prend le temps d'imaginer que chacun avait une vie coupée, qui avait des rêves, il pensait se marier, il avait sa culture, il avait une petite chèvre qui le nourrissait, il avait des parents. Quand on remet l'humain dans un contexte affectif et bien là on est ébranlé, on se dit voilà ce qu'on a fait ; on a oublié que l'on a affaire à des êtres humains. Et c'est ce que …c'est vraiment tout le projet de ce livre, montrer l'humanité, l'humanité qui bafoue l'humanité ; l'humanité qui nie l'humanité et qui se renie en même temps. Parce que quand un être humain oublie qu'il a en face de lui un autre être humain et qu'il entre dans une violence dans une férocité, dans une barbarie innommable et bien là lui-même il se remet en question et il se justifie par toutes sortes d'emplâtres et de choses comme ça qui vont adoucir les angles mais à quel prix ? le Dieu de ceci, ou l'église ou une loi, on s'adosse à une loi, à des lois qui sont faites par des hommes, animés par le profit et on va se justifier et donner toutes sortes de raisons, et en même temps cette logique, c'est vraiment la logique de la personne qui est en plein délire, moi ça me fait penser à ça. Mais au délire très organisé des patients…le délire de persécution, il pense que voilà untel est passé par là, il avait ouvert les rideaux de tel manière, c'était à moitié ouvert, ça veut dire ceci, ça veut dire cela. Pour moi, l'humain s'éloigne de l'humain quand il tue, quand il fabrique des armes, quand il assassine. Quand aujourd'hui des gens fabriquent des armes dans des usines, c'est bien que ça va servir à quelque chose, c'est pas des jouets. Quand on fabrique justement des jouets en plastique pour des enfants, mais quel est le but de ça, je ne comprends pas, des mitraillettes, pour des enfants. Mais pourquoi ? je ne comprends pas. Alors moi je suis contre toutes les formes de violence et dans mon métier vraiment, j'ai appris la puissance de la communication simple avec des personnes. Et voilà, je me dis que l'être humain insulte son intelligence quand il devient violent, quand il n'est pas dans la communication. Nous avons tous les mots pour échanger. Et quand je raconte une histoire, je crois que je parle à un humain que je ne peux peut-être pas rencontrer. Mais Elise je vous rencontre, car nous nous sommes rencontrés, on devait se rencontrer ! Parce que vous avez cherché à me rencontrer ! Alors voilà c'est ce qui m'anime en fait. Et je me dis, je suis très très chanceuse de pouvoir communiquer avec ce don, ce qui m'a été donnée, et avoir travaillé pour améliorer mon style, mon talent ! trouver ma voix, trouver ma propre voix, être dans une authenticité, vraiment, vraiment c'est important pour moi. Passer autant d'heures dans la solitude comme ça, sinon c'est pas la peine, ça n'a pas de sens ! Donc toucher l'humain. Ecrire vraiment contre la barbarie, la domination, la violence. (…)

Oui….et ensuite vous publiez à Mercure

Oui au Mercure de France. Parce que Stock a changé ; parce que les éditions Stocks ont laissé Claude Durand partir. Il a laissé sa place à un jeune éditeur qui malheureusement est décédé qui s'appelait Jean-Marc Roberts. Claude Durand ça a été

mon éditeur, j'ai beaucoup aimé cet éditeur. Il est décédé aussi malheureusement. Alors, Claude Durand il publiait des auteurs qui venaient d'Haïti, de l'Ile Maurice, qui venaient des pays qui ne sont pas la France hexagonale, des territoires ; parce que je vais pas dire que la Guadeloupe c'est un pays, c'est une terre, mais c'est ailleurs, c'est ailleurs. C'est pas le français standard, le français de l'hexagone. Donc avec une couleur, avec un rythme avec une façon d'écrire le français qui est passionnante aussi, qui est…Et avec un autre imaginaire également. Et Jean-Marc Roberts, je crois, a écarté tous les auteurs haïtiens, mauriciens, martiniquais ; tous sont partis. Et il a resséré dans un noyau dur, très parisien en publiant notamment Christine Angeot, des auteurs très très parisiens. Bon il est décedé , je ne veux pas…il continuait à publier un grec Vassilis Alexakis. Mais ça c'était vraiment une …c'est un grand talent aussi. Mais les auteurs qui étaient pas en vue spécialement ont été évincés. Et donc tout le monde a couru chercher un éditeur et j'ai eu la chance d'être accueilli au Mercure de France, et ça me ramène à mes premiers livres avec la lettre de sa mère, de Simone Gallimard, qui a retrouvé d'ailleurs dans les fichiers, quand elle a repris la maison de sa mère, elle a retrouvé d'ailleurs mon nom. Puisqu'elle m'a dit, Gisèle on avait déjà ton adresse.

Ah d'accord. Et comment vous avez eu contact avec eux ?

Avec Isabelle Gallimard ?

Oui.

Alors quand j'ai eu deux refus…pour « Chair Piment ». Pour « Chair Piment », c'était en même temps que mon divorce, mon déménagement, changement de travail, changement d'hôpital, ouhlala, et là c'était la dernière chose que je croyais qui pouvait m'arriver quoi. Mon éditeur me lâche. Il faut que je change ça aussi. Toujours 2000. Alors Jean-Marc Roberts me dit ah non Gisèle, il faut un an de travail. Ça m'était jamais arrivé. Je dis bon ben d'accord, ok. Bon j'essaye pendant un an de travailler, travailler, travailler, de revoir le texte. Je lui ramène au bout d'un an, il me dit oh non il y a trois mois de travail ! Alors là je lui dis…je ne voulais plus, je ne pouvais plus voir le texte ; vous voyez c'est comme un pensum, au bout d'un moment tu vomis le texte, tu as trop lu, tu sais plus ce qui est bon, ce qui est pas bon. Tu n'as plus le recul ! Et je lui dis bon ben, ça sera sans moi, là c'est pas possible. Et donc je l'ai présenté chez Gallimard et là c'est allé très très vite. J'ai un éditeur, Jean-Marie Laclavetine, m'a appellé. Non il y a déjà …des auteurs martiniquais, tu seras un peu…pas bien traités, pas bien mis en avant parce que…bon. Mais Isabelle Gallimard est intéressé par ton texte. Et là j'ai été accueillie…

Et là, est-ce qu'elle avait un créneau plus femme écrivain ou pas vraiment ?

Femme écrivain…oui, elle publie les femmes. Oui elle publie beaucoup de femmes, il y a beaucoup de femmes qui écrivent de toute façon. Elle regarde pas ça hein. Elle voit des écrivains. Elle voit des écrivains. C'est pas un éditeur plus féministe qu'autre

chose. Mais c'était super ! C'est super, jusqu'à maintenant…je travaille sur mon nouveau roman.

(…)

Oui. Alors… autre question. Je me demandais si le fait d'être une femme, cela vous a aidé ou pas dans votre carrière d'écrivain ou ça n'a pas eu d'importance ?

Cela ne m'a pas aidé particulièrement.

Ou cela a constitué un obstacle plutôt….

Moi j'ai un auteur, quand j'ai sorti l'exil selon Julia, j'ai un auteur qui a dit ON en a marre des histoires de grand-mère. On était sur le même panel, le gars me dit…il y a une condescendance de la part de certains auteurs. Il y a une condescendance.

Oui parce que l'approche est plus personnelle

Je ne sais pas, je ne sais pas…je crois que chaque auteur est unique et écrit avec tellement de choses, écrit avec tellement de choses. Et en même temps, c'est une libération, c'est un voyage.

Mais vous pensez que vous avez été considérée différemment parce que vous êtes une femme écrivain ?

Non, non. Avec les éditeurs ?

Oui

Non, non pas du tout. Il y a une posture de l'écrivain antillais, j'ai remarqué ça qui réfléchit sur son œuvre plus comme un essayiste, qui va lancer des théories et qui va parler au nom du peuple. Bon moi peut être que je parle plus facilement de moi, parce que c'est ce que je connais, je peux pas parler au nom des gens. Je dis ce que j'observe, je dis ce qui me contrarie, ce qui m'interpelle, ce qui me fait mal, mais je ne me pose pas en parlant au nom de toute une population, voilà. Je ne suis pas un porte-parole, ni un porte-drapeau, et je revendique cette liberté d'être moi avec mon histoire. J'ai un auteur antillais qui m'a un jour dit que lui il ne mettra jamais de la neige dans un roman. Je lui ai dit ben désolée moi il y avait de la neige dans mon enfance.

Oui, oui ! Et justement, une autre question, par rapport à vos relations avec les autres auteurs de la Caraïbe, j'ai lu dans un entretien que vous êtes plutôt indépendante…

Oui je suis plutôt de mon côté. (…) mais en fait quand j'ai écrit la Grande drive, là c'est un livre que j'ai écrit pour dire mon appartenance à un pays, à la Guadeloupe.

Quand j'ai écrit la Grande drive, on était au plein cœur du mouvement de la créolité, ce mouvement avait le vent en poupe. Et moi j'ai dit, mais moi aussi je peux écrire. Et c'est mon roman le plus créole, très créolisé. Et après je prends de la distance avec cette écriture. Mais c'était une facilité pour moi d'écrire comme ça, et en même temps, c'était pour dire tout mon amour pour la Guadeloupe, pour le pays. Pour dire que même si je suis née à Paris, je suis un enfant du pays, de la campagne, je connais. Et voilà c'était mon gros challenge. C'était ma manière à moi d'être dans cette créolité-là, d'être dans le fin fond des campagnes de Guadeloupe. J'ai adoré, j'ai adoré écrire.

Et après, pourquoi vous vous en êtes plutôt éloignée ?

Parce que c'était pas ma vrai voix, V O I X. C'était pas ma voix naturelle. Je veux écrire avec tout ce que je suis, dans une totale liberté, je veux pas m'imposer de créoliser chaque phrase, chaque mot, de mettre une sauce pimentée (rire) pour dire que c'est l'authenticité. C'était valable dans les années 90 mais bon là je ne me sens pas d'écrire comme ça , même si j'aime beaucoup toutes les images, mais je les pratique avec modération, une certaine modération. Bon on sent qu'on est dans le pays, la Caraïbe, dans un milieu créolophone, mais je n'appuie pas trop.

(…)

Et j'ai lu aussi que vous ne vous définissiez pas comme une féministe…

Non ça veut tout dire…et puis c'est facile de dire oui. Bon je suis une femme, je suis une femme. Je suis un être humain sur cette terre. Parce que si je me définis comme une féministe, j'ai peur d'exclure les autres, les enfants.

Oui mais est-ce que vous avez eu des liens avec des mouvements féministes ou pas du tout… ?

Pas vraiment… non. Mais parce qu'il y a des causes à défendre ; parce que voilà il faut regarder autour de soi. Tout le monde sait qu'il y a des enfants qui sont prostitués dans leur famille sur plusieurs continents. Féministes ? non je veux tout d'abord regarder toute la misère, toute la misère des migrants avant de brandir le drapeau des féministes. Il y a des êtres humains. J'ai vu qu'il y a des femmes qui portent des bébés. I l faut défendre toutes les causes. Je n'en mets pas vraiment une en avant. Bon je remercie celles qui se sont battus pour la liberté et tous les êtres humains qui se sont battus pour les libertés, pour plus de respect des uns des autres. Mais je veux pas m'enfermer en fait. Je ne veux pas…je veux pas avoir une autre étiquette. Et puis c'est pour moi une forme d'honnêteté, c'est une forme d'honnêteté parce que c'est une manière de me protéger, voilà regardez, féministe. Effectivement on me le dit à chaque fois que je fais une rencontre littéraire, on me le dit, ah GP vous écrivez sur les femmes, la cause des femmes…mais effectivement ces femmes qui sont battues, qui sont violées, je parle de ça. Oui je parle des femmes ; je parle des êtres humains abusés, des êtres humains opprimés ; ça m'intéresse et c'est un sujet. Et si ma plume

peut être utile, et bien voilà, je préfère la tremper dans cette encre-là. Mais c'est pas une insulte. Je…voilà.

Et vous n'avez pas d'affiliation politique particulière non plus…ou de lien avec la politique ?

Pas du tout. Non parce qu'à partir du moment où on a une certaine notoriété, on est vite brandi comme une marionnette. On est utilisé. Son nom… dis quelque chose…Et puis je préfère rester ici à Marie-Galante, pas trop me montrer, être dans ma création, dans la joie, dans la joie de ma création, dans mon bonheur de création et puis voilà. Et choisir, choisir. Ne pas m'imposer des obligations d'aller…ah c'est tel politique qui fait ça, peut-être on me donnera un truc en contrepartie. Je veux pas me compromettre. (…)

Est-ce que vous vous considérez comme écrivaine plutôt Française, Française de la Guadeloupe, Francophone, ou écrivaine de littérature-monde.

Littérature-Monde ?

Oui oui

Alors est-ce que vous pouvez poser cette question-là …par exemple à Amélie Nothomb ? Est-ce que c'est une écrivaine de littérature monde ?

Euh oui, elle est francophone.

A qui on pose ces questions-là ? Est-ce qu'on pose ces questions à une Américaine ? Mais pourquoi on pose ces questions ? Non ça m'intéresse hein…mais on enferme les gens ! Moi je suis un oiseau libre…

Oui…

Non mais je suis pas fâchée hein ! Je suis intéressée, je suis intéressée ! parce que ca a du sens hein ! Est-ce que c'est parce que je suis noire ? parce que je viens d'où ? j'ai mon passeport Européen ! Elise, quand ils ont mis les passeports Européens, je suis arrivée à l'aéroport, je savais pas par où passer parce que c'était marqué citoyen européen et puis étranger, je me dis par où je passe, parce que c'est vrai, cette question de l'identité est très intéressante ! Je suis Guadeloupéenne, mais bon je vis à Marie-Galante. Je suis née à Paris, je suis une parisienne, j'ai ce côté parisienne. J'aime bien Paris, j'aime beaucoup Paris. J'ai de la tendresse pour Paris. J'aime aller faire mon shopping à Paris. Je suis ancrée dans la culture guadeloupéenne, je fais la cuisine, je cuisine bien. Je fais la cuisine avec les légumes, les épices mais ici. Francophone, non, ça c'est…francophone, non, j'écris avec les langues que je connais, le créole et le français ; la langue anglaise je l'entends, bon je peux mettre deux ou trois mots d'anglais dans un texte. Mais j'écris avec toute ma liberté. Francophone, pff,

franchement c'est un mot qui est inventé. Bon Français, je parle français. J'aime beaucoup la langue française, j'ai mes dictionnaires. Je vais chercher des mots qui sont oubliés. J'utilise les mots comme des fruits dans…voilà je les mets ensemble. Ça c'est vraiment le bonheur de la création. Si c'est être ça Francophone, parler Français, écrire avec la langue française en mêlant la langue française à la langue créole, en mettant des mots qui n'ont pas l'habitude de se rencontrer ensemble, voilà, en jonglant avec les mots, pour faire de l'art, pour faire de la beauté. C'est mon but aussi, parce que je veux que ça soit beau. Bon beau, qui est un sens, qui est un fond, mais la beauté, je suis à la recherche de la beauté. Alors j'aime ma langue française, c'est ma langue, c'est ma langue. C'est cette langue qui me permet de m'exprimer et d'aller vraiment au plus loin de ce que j'ai envie de dire, de raconter en filant comme ça, des émotions très fines. Donc Francophone, Guadeloupéenne, écrivaine. Je sais aujourd'hui que l'écriture est en moi. L'écriture est quelque chose qui m'est tout à fait nécessaire (…) Je sais pas jusqu'à quel âge je vais écrire mais après francophone, française…Oui sur wikipédia « femme de lettre française » c'est marqué sur wikipédia, femme de lettres française. Quand des fois je suis en France et je vais dans une librairie, alors les livres des auteurs antillais, des fois sont mis dans littérature africaine, …euh jamais dans littérature française hein. C'est « Amérique », « Caraïbe » ...Mais française c'est difficile.

INTERVIEW WITH Gisèle Pineau on 10 May 2017, on the patio of her house in Marie-Galantes, at 2: 00 pm.

TRANSLATION Pierre-Elliot CASWELL

So, you were telling me that you are 61 years old, you were born in 1956.

I am 61 years old, I was born in Paris, in 1956. I'm a Guadeloupean Parisian, or a Parisian Guadeloupean, or a Guadeloupean born in Paris.

Great. My first questions will be about your family. So, you were born in Paris…

I was born in Paris because my father joined the army during World War II and then, after the war, he stayed in the French army and made it his career. He retired when he was a chief warrant officer in the French army. This was during the colonial era. It was just before Guadeloupe became a French department, an era, you know, when much of the Antillean inferiority complex remained. My parents, the people my parents spent time with—they did not really speak the Creole language. So, what is the context? It's that of Guadeloupeans that were born in Guadeloupe. My father was a military man, my mother a housewife who was seduced by the appeal, the beauty of the French military uniform. She barely knew my father and… they were married after three months. At the time, crossing the ocean was done on transatlantic liners. Crossing would take around ten days. People would arrive either in Marseilles or Le Havre. And this was how you'd land in France. And me, I was born in Paris, my brothers and sisters—this was the context into which my parents arrived.

And what I was wondering was: what made your father want to join the French army – the Free France forces, right? During the war?

Yes, as a dissident, like many young Guadeloupeans. Well, it was about rebelling against Maréchal Pétain's forces.

And how old was he?

He was 17. 17 or 18 years old.

And did he get an education at all?

No, he was in the Carnot high school, learning carpentry. But he was a brilliant student. . . My maternal grandfather fought in World War I. . . He was drafted, his joining was not a deliberate act like my father who embarked on a fisherman's rowing boat at night. Fishermen would work as smugglers, bringing across every daring youngster who wished to free France because they were fervently devoted to this

freedom, you know, and it was important for them to fight for freedom and this love of France—this unconditional love. People were ready to die for France.

Yes, because Guadeloupe was under occupation by the Vichy government, like Martinique…

Yes of course! It was Vichy in the tropics! So, in Martinique, there was admiral Robert and, in Guadeloupe, governor Sorin. And every morning, schoolchildren would raise the flag and sing "Maréchal, nous voilà" ("Marshall, here we come"). And there were all these people who listened to the Maréchal de Gaulle on the radio, who, at the time, used to be called "general Microphone" because of the posters that were stuck up overnight by dissidents. On the facades of all the houses, and on the town hall, you could see a drawing of a man speaking with a big microphone, you know. This was in England—he was in the United Kingdom, and we called him "general microphone," because he had this microphone, drawn like this. "General Microphone, we are going to follow general Microphone!" It was a call to resistance. And I think that Guadeloupeans have the soul of Resistance fighters, an unwillingness to let anyone jeopardize their freedom. There is a history that echoes all this, it's called the Great history. So my father ultimately decided to embrace a military career, it was his path.

It was his path.

It was his path. He was very proud of his career, he fought in the colonies.

Wasn't he disappointed by France?

My father was never disappointed by France, he travelled a lot with France. He fought in wars. He went to Vietnam, which, at the time, was called Indochina. He made war in Indochina. This was before I was born. It was all the young people from the French colonies that served France everywhere in the world and allowed France to keep its grip on people. To be part of the great family of the empire, of the French empire that was everywhere in the world, of the France's glory—to serve in all of this. And the dominated peoples had to fight in order to claim their independence.

Yes, and even to be able to receive their pension after World War II, I am thinking of Senegal…

Senegal; I mean, this is… This is not even something that falls into what is considered "politically correct." And this is where you can see that human beings are not treated equally based on their skin color, whatever we might say today. This is the 21st century but human beings are treated differently.

Yes, certainly. But as for your father, didn't he have a problem making a career in the French army?

No, because there were many Antilleans in the army too. And so, he ended up in Vietnam, I mean Indochina at the time, for… two years. He had a woman there, with whom he had two children.

Yes, I read about this, and they all lived together with your family in Paris.

Yes, I talk about it in one of my books, *Mes quatre femmes*. And then, after this, he went to Senegal. He already had a boy with a different woman before getting married to my mother. He also went to Congo Brazzaville. And back then, I had already been born, I was perhaps two or three years old. We were in Congo, in the military quarters of course. It was like a village, with all these French military types hanging about. We were in that milieu.

A military base?

Yes, a military base where families live. It was the presence of France in Congo. And in 60 or 61, my father came back to France because, like any military man, he was allowed to come back to his native land, to his island. So, just as Corsicans were allowed to spend three months in Corsica, Guadeloupeans were allowed to spend three months in Guadeloupe—same for Martinique. A kind of end-of-campaign vacation. And this is where he reunited with his mother who ended up travelling to France with us, something that was very important to me. She stayed in France from 61 to 69… during or just after the events of May 68. And so, this grandmother—this is what you need to imagine, a family of Black people, in a suburban apartment where many military people and military families lived. You have to imagine these six children in what was, after all, a small apartment since there were only 3 bedrooms: the girls' room, the boys' room, the parents' room There were with my mother—my father was often absent. He left, and he was gone for three or four years in French Polynesia where he had two kids. He had yet another life over there.

What about his wife in Vietnam?

Well, she was gone. Indochina, in the meantime, had become Vietnam. It's a real story, a saga even… So, my father asked one of his military friends to adopt one of the boys he had with this woman during the time Vietnam was still Indochina, since this friend was single. This boy was the eldest. As for the second boy, he tried to send him directly to Guadeloupe with the mother. So, he tried to take care of his children. Eventually, when I was 30, I ended up discovering that this person whom I've always thought belonged to a different family was, in fact, my half-brother.

Yes. Oh, you met him there?

I did. I was told: "Here, this is your brother." So… This can perhaps explain why this naturally comes up in my novels, where one is faced with many family secrets. I really like going into the intimacy of families, but also beyond just what we are given to see.

Yes, of course.

And, you know, Tahiti. He went there many times—crossing the oceans was very long at the time, it was by boat. And then, he would come back, just like that, without a warning, even though we had an organized life. There was a lot of dread. My father was especially severe, and when he'd come back, we barely knew him. We knew him through his violence. And the girls in my family – me and my older sister – we knew him through, well… his behavior, which was decidedly unfatherly.... I mean that my sister and I were molested. Yes, I have to say it to explain it well. To explain, also, why I write, Élise. I am a little girl, and I am forced to survive, to find a way to survive to the external violence—because it's racism. I go to school and people call me a negress. They tell me: "Go back to your hut in Africa." I don't have any friends. Here I am, dispossessed of myself. Like a bird that cannot open its wings. I can't laugh since, every day, it's "black sheep," "negress," "go back to Africa."

What about your brothers and sisters, do they go through the same thing?

Not all of them. They were probably called names but maybe they didn't care. And me—it hurt me, it punctured me, it pierced me.

Amongst your siblings, you are…

The fourth one. If you don't count…

Yes, of course.

I was telling you earlier that I am 61 years old. I've reached this age and I have, well… I eventually managed to re-center myself and tell myself: "There, all of it for this." And so, this childhood, it gave me a different perspective. Today, I mean now, I say: "Yeah, I saved my own skin because, inside, it was dangerous, violent." There were whippings too—whippings with a belt. I would witness it: my brother coming back home with bad grades for misbehaving, well, he was beaten with a belt. It was very violent. My older sister who was molested and… We don't speak in my family, we don't say anything. My mother didn't protect us. She was there, but she herself was, well… I didn't do psychoanalytic therapy but perhaps my books have allowed me to… There was also something violent about feeling that we were in danger. The mother was also there, reading romance novels—that's also part of it. Me, I write books—I write books but it's a life that's, you know, very tenuous. And I wrote my first novel when I am 10 years old. Not really poetry. Something to tell a story rather, to make up stories.

Yes, you even said that you used to sell little stories?

Oh yes.

Did you keep them?

No, no, because I travelled. I would cut out sheets of paper, as I've said multiple times—I would copy my story.

And, the one at 10, was it a novel?

A novel, yes, a novel. A novella.

But did you keep that one?

Actually no, I didn't keep it. We moved out in 70, when Général de Gaulle left power, because French people voted "no" during his great referendum. And my father said that he couldn't live in a country that disavows the savior of France. Because my father, he was quite a character… he was a troubled person because he was, at the same time, a hero, which really goes to the heart of Ambivalence. This is where all the ambivalence rests. A hero, at 17. At least, I've often depicted him as a hero. You meet him in *Exile: According to Julia*. And, at the same time, there's this darker side, a more…

But what did his father do?

His father was a farmer who fought in war too.

And where in Guadeloupe did he come from?

He came from Capesterre-Belle-Eau. From Routier de Capesterre-Belle-Eau…He was horrible! He'd beat my grandmother, Julia, which is why my father took her in. And my grandfather, he was so ugly. You could read every bit of vileness on his face, the way he walked, his expressions... I mean, perhaps I saw him as ugly because my grandmother, Man Ya, was a raft for me. She was love, raw love. Someone who wrapped me in her tender embrace. And so, when I would see this grandfather of mine, with all his medals from World War I… With his old uniforms that were too large on his shoulders and his belt tucked in… And so, my grandmother Julia, Man Ya—you have to imagine her at the time, in this apartment, with the girls, the bunkbeds. And every night, you know, I'd go to sleep in the arms of Man Ya. I was with her and I'd beg her to tell me about Guadeloupe, what it was like, because I didn't know. I arrived in Guadeloupe when I was 14 years old, the second time. The first time was after Congo, in the sixties; and, the second time, we stayed 10 years and it was in the seventies that we went to Guadeloupe because…

To Martinique?

Martinique, yes, but also to Guadeloupe because we left during the school break, and we made a stop in Guadeloupe where I was reunited with my grandmother Julia.

Ah, yes, because she had left in 69…

Yes, she had left in 69. She was experiencing depression, although I'm not sure about the word… So, the doctors said she had to go back to her husband's side because she was married before God. "She must go back." The doctors said that it was depression, but me, I say that it was a hunger strike. And she'd told me, "We will meet again, we will meet again." And there you go. I also like to say that it's thanks to her prayers that Général de Gaulle was removed from power [*laughs*], I mean, that he left power—so that we could go back to Guadeloupe, because it truly was my deepest desire: to be in a country where there are Black people, where I would be accepted, where I am accepted, where I can live a normal life. Without people seeing a negress that must be insulted. See, that's what was unbearable: when I'd climb up a rope—I remember, I can still hear them. Here I am, climbing up a rope, and the teacher is there. And I feel rather proud because I think to myself "you're going to show them." And then I hear: "It makes sense, she's a monkey." And the teacher doesn't say anything.

Oh…

The teacher doesn't say anything, Élise. And what do I want to do once I've reached the top? I want to throw myself down, to fall and die. And I was also—I remember, it was in 68—I had a teacher who would make me sit under her desk. I actually tell this story in *Exile: According to Julia* where I even wrote the real name of the teacher, Madame Baron. Because she didn't want to see the face of a negress. So, today, I ask myself: can this still exist? Are children going to witness this? A little girl, in her corner. Will children accept this without telling their parents? Without any sign of protest? Without the teacher being fired? Back then, nothing. "Teacher, she's a monkey" and the teacher stayed quiet. . .

Wow…

But, Élise, today, I thank these kids … It was, no doubt, a hardship, but they have allowed me to become who I am today. I had to manage on my own, to navigate this mess. It was like a mangrove I had to cross. And then, I found it in myself, since the words were always in me, since my experiences—everything I tell, comes from my imagination. Everything I have invented, I did it to soothe myself, to soothe myself—to give meaning to things, too.

So, the first novel you wrote at 10 tells about your experience?

My first novel looks a lot like *Un papillon dans la cité.* It's about an awesome little girl who, by the way, knows about exile. If you've read some of my books, you will find this theme because, you know, a writer always writes the same book. So, you will find the theme of exile.

(…)

The characters, all of my characters in all of my novels, use their experience, the challenges they face and the things they'll have to encounter in order to become who they are. They will shape themselves and this is also [an experience of] solitude, of being alone. To become who you are, but by yourself, alone. And, at the end of the road, you will cross over, like Ulysses. You will cross over, but there'll be monsters, sirens, a cyclops, and a raging sea. And you'll get there, you know. Very often, my readers tell me: "Yes, Ms. Pineau, you write about terrible things." And I say: "Yes, but there are at least three pages of hope at the end." It's true, but you accompany the heroine or the main character, you accompany them, just like that: you are with these characters, right on their heels, right next to their beating heart. But they are getting somewhere, they are going somewhere. They are crossing in order to grow, to shape themselves, to understand themselves. But also to accept their pasts—childhood is not this place, it's not this territory where they must dwell forever. They must abandon it, they must stop victimizing themselves. They must leave the past behind because they cannot change it. This is, also, what it is about, you know? What you find in my books.

I see. When you are elaborating a character, do you know where they will end up from the get go?

Not exactly. It's very hazy but I accept it, this kind of soft focus. I accept it, and I am even craving the experience—to be inside this haze—because it's very exciting. I don't really know why, but I have to trust it. I only wrote one novel with a definite plan. I had met this French teacher once who told me: "You know, your novel isn't really a novel. You need a plan. This is what a novel is." He explained to me what a novel was. And I thought: "Okay, well… I'm going to give it a try." I was bored out of my mind. Now, when I write novels, I am truly like a painter in front of her blank canvas. I have an idea of something, an intuition—a lot of intuition. But I don't really know how it will turn out or even what direction to go in. So, every morning, when I go to my writing station, I think: "Well, let's see what happens today." And here I go. It's like I go on a walk and I will, I don't know… walk into something incredible. So, I want to be able to surprise myself—I let myself be surprised by whatever may suddenly emerge. And this is what writing is to me. So, Élise, as you've seen, I write a lot based on my own history, *really* a lot. And now, I move forward, but I'm not sure—I don't want to write useless stories, I don't want to write one book too many. And so, I believe that there have been multiple cycles in what I have crafted, in what I wrote, but we might talk about it later.

Yes, of course. But, in any case, in between your first novel, which you wrote when you were 10, and the first novel you published when you were 37…

Yes, there were many other novels in between.

Yes, this is what I was wondering… How writing came to you based on your trajectory. Because…

Yes, of course. So, Élise, a first book when I was 10, which disappeared in the house moves. But I always kept writing. We left for Martinique and I always kept writing. In fact, in my family, I was the one who would write stories, right there, in the corner.

And your brother would draw.

Yes, my brother would draw. He would draw my book covers. He had talent, but he gave up. I don't know…

But otherwise, you were the only one to write?

The only one. The only one to read, too! My father, this hero, he wanted his kids to be educated. He'd buy encyclopedias. He'd buy French classics. Everything was right there. I had walls covered in encyclopedias.

I see, so when you were a child?

Yes, as a child, there were books in the house. And I fell in love.

You fell in love with classics of literature.

There was everything: Zola; theatre like Corneille; Balzac. There truly was, I mean, everything in poetry. There were encyclopedias. I enjoyed feeling the weight of these books—very, very heavy, like this, on my knees. And to learn one or two words each day, to turn the pages. I like this. I bought some—I mean I have encyclopedias here, because they are a part of my childhood that is, also, full of light since it was this window into culture, into histories and mythologies. Everything was there.

But was there literature? Because you say that you were influenced by Richard Wright and, later, Simone Schwarz Bart, Jacques Roumain…

Jacques Roumain. Yes, they were classics of some kind.

When you were a child, was he part of your bookshelf? Or how did you discover them? Toni Morrison, too.

Ah yes, of course. So, when I was a child… It was Zola. I owe everything to Zola.

But Zola—it was at home, not at school.

It was at home. We had books. They were bound books, soft-bound. And Zola, well, I saw myself in his books because they were about poverty, about the struggle to pull

yourself out of poverty. And then, Victor Hugo too, of course. But Zola… Afterwards, American literature, but I don't know how. But *The Black Child*, I read it, I remember, it was in this apartment which I left when I was 14 years old. I don't know how it landed there. There were also tales and legends from the Antilles. Not immediately Simone Schwartz Bart. Simone Schwartz Bart… it was when I arrived in Guadeloupe.

What about Haitian authors, like Jacques Roumain?

Jacques Roumain, yes, he is kind of a classic, like Joseph Zobel is.

And were they in your home when you were young?

No, only when I arrived in Martinique. Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* was the book that every Antillean would read. *Masters of the Dew* is a masterpiece.

Yes, it's a masterpiece.

There you go, it was an essential book, a book about struggle, about resistance, and a book about people who take control of their lives, about leaders.

Because your father did not read the poets of the Negritude movement, I imagine…

No, we did not… And you know, as I was telling you earlier about the Creole language, only my grandmother spoke it since she did not speak French. But my parents wanted us to be educated, to be evolved. I think that, for my father, to have a military career was like a social promotion: to wear the uniform of the French army, to live in France. My mother loved to say this: "France, ah… France."

Yes, so, what about her parents. What did they do and where did they come from?

My maternal grandfather managed a sugar plantation. There is a history of jealousy, of witchcraft. At one point, he lost everything. My grandmother had a store in the little town of Goyave, in Guadeloupe. And then, at one point—and this is the family's mythology—we say that, because of jealousy, some worms started eating everything, like entire bags of rice. She lost all of her goods and then, one day, or so my mother says, she and her mom were sitting under a mango tree and my maternal grandmother gave them three green mangos because there was nothing else to eat. This was miserable poverty. This is how they left Goyave, in order to flee jealousy and witchcraft. And they arrived in Capesterre.

I see, a family that had some means but that lost everything afterwards.

Exactly. She and her family were esteemed in the small town of Goyave, almost like aristocrats. My mother is a mulatto. So, it's always this lighter skin, this much lighter

skin, and also the "beautiful hair," with quotation marks. We say, "beautiful hair." And my mother married this tall negro.

So, her father was white?

No, he was a *chabin*, we say *chabin*. And my grandmother was a mulatto. You have to imagine, you know, like in the United States, these Indigenous women with very long, thick hair. She was like this, with tanned skin. So, my mother was born with very, very, *very* light skin. She's light-skinned like this, my mother. And so, she was called "the aristocrat" in her village. And, by the way, my maternal grandfather didn't come to my parents' wedding. He forbade her marriage to this negro. Because my very ugly grandfather, you know, he scared everyone, he didn't have a good reputation. So, my [maternal] grandfather didn't want his daughter to… He would say: "Why do you want to marry this man, this boy? They're not good people." So, she married this man for the prestige of the uniform, for the travel, for possibilities…

And not for the prestige of, in quotation marks, "skin tone."

No. But, at the same time, his black skin would vanish behind the prestige of the uniform.

What about your mother, did she go to university?

No. Perhaps she went as far as … I'm not sure, some sort of certificate at the end of elementary school.[15]

Neither did your grandmother?

My maternal grandmother?

Yes.

No. But they were people who knew how to read.

What about your other grandmother?

No, she might have gone to school for two or three days only.

Ah, okay, I see.

No, she was completely illiterate, she'd work in cane fields. But it doesn't mean anything because, in the end, she was *the* great lady. The great lady who was able to

[15] Pineau uses the term "petit diplôme." It would seem that she is here talking about a kind of certificate which no longer exists and which, at the time, was awarded to pupils to certify their elementary education (around 11 years old).

bring across the country to us with a story. I don't know if you are familiar with this anecdote. One day, on French television, during the sixties, I was watching this documentary on slavery. And I saw a colony of Black people, chained up, naked, shackled … And I said to my mother: "Mom, what's this?" What I saw were people who look like me. There were already so few Black people on television that, when I saw Black people, I saw them in shackles, naked. My mother said, no, it was nothing, that it was in the past. And my grandmother Julia said in Creole: "Well, there it is, we too come from there, from Africa." She passed on to me what her grandmother had told her. She told me that we were slaves, that our ancestors crossed with the boats.

Yes, she explained it to you.

She explained it. And so, it's she who gave me the land, the story of my country. It's she who gave me the language—language because my mother only spoke French to her children. But it was just what it was. A lot of migrants, when they arrive at their destination, well, they want to give what's best for their kids. So, they banish their language, especially if they consider their language a pidgin. Things could be different with a prestigious language, but a pidgin like this one is the language of old negroes. This is what Creole language was at the time, the language of plantations. It's what we said.

Yes, there is a very negative representation of it.

A very negative one of people who do not know how to speak French.

Uneducated.

Exactly. Illiterate, moronic people. And so they want their kids to speak French. But my grandmother was like a special pawn in a game of chess, a choice piece. A choice piece who was there, who didn't say anything. She was there to bring disorder to my father's organization. My father wanted everything to be organized. Meanwhile, however, she would transmit things to us—the Creole language, the love we received, the feeling of being loved, of being loved… All this is my grandmother. I write, in *Exile: According to Julia,* how she would come wake us up at night to give us an apple when we had been deprived of dessert.

Yes, and when she came to school with the umbrella.

The umbrella and the military outfit. But it was all true, and we'd think: "Wow, she's ready to defeat everything…" because she transgresses authority. Our parents deprived us of dessert and she'd wait until they were asleep: "ti moun, ti moun,…? Ti pomme France." This is tenderness, it's love, and you can feel it. You can really, really, *really* feel it. It's wonderful to have had this, and I am very grateful for it.

What about the stories she'd tell, do you remember them?

Oh, my goodness, yes. She tells us about she-devils, about soucougnans—she tells us about all of this in her bed, with her smell. But also prayers, with a feeling of belonging. “But you have a country.” When I told her that I was insulted… she’d tell me: “But, you’ll come back.” The faith, the faith to know that, one day, you’ll come back. That’s why I like to say that it’s thanks to her that May 68 happened, that France was blowing up everywher. Because of my grandmother who wanted her grandkids to come join her [*laughs*]. It’s a joke, of course. But also, what I learned with my grandmother and what I write about (since you've read *Exile: According to Julia*): about how you can also feel like a victim of prejudice at the same time, because that’s how I used to position myself… I, too, was full of prejudice about this old negro woman from Guadeloupe, since she didn’t know how to read. I have the feeling that I dominate her, that I’m smarter, that I have power—the power to tell her: “But, look, it’s easy.” So, my grandmother taught me humility. Because when I arrive in Guadeloupe, I’m 14 years old, I’m 14 years old in 1970, during the first school break, we go back to our native land, and I’m looking at trees. Tell me Élise, when you look at trees, do you recognize them?

Some, yes.

Some. Me, when I was 14, I found myself in this Guadeloupean wilderness, it was as if I were illiterate, as illiterate as my grandmother was when she faced letters. Me, in front of this Guadeloupean wilderness, I was illiterate. I don’t know what this tree might be. I don’t know trees, so…

Yes, since you grew up in a city.

But [where] I grew up, there were lawns, forbidden lawns on which you couldn’t walk. Trees that didn’t bear fruit. And it’s my grandmother Julia, Man Ya, who taught me, who teaches me, without pretension, without taunt, without irony—she teaches me to recognize, to prepare cocoa, because she used to sell cocoa sticks. She had an extraordinary garden. That’s why I wanted to reproduce a garden myself. We can go and visit it, if you’d like.

Oh yes, of course!

And cocoa, coffee: how to grill it, how to pollinize vanilla, how to pick June plums, how to climb trees. She had a river that would flow behind her house. She gave me immersive lessons in how to find my place again in the country, how to position myself; and also the Creole language, and how to eat Creole food. My brothers and sisters enjoyed staying in the village, at my maternal grandmother’s home with my mother. Me, I would ask to be taken to Routier—Routier is on the side of the volcano when you go up the mountain, I mean, not really the volcano but on the mountain, like this, at Capesterre-Belle-Eau. And there are woods, it’s wonderful, truly. It’s dense, it’s dense.

Yes, especially Basse-Terre.

Basse-Terre. It's Basse-Terre. So, in this kind of context, you know, there's a very powerful feeling, Élise, of always being a little on the side of things, in parallel to other people. Because when I was in France, I'd be the "negress" and, especially at the time, the only Black people I'd see at recess were my brothers and sisters, they were the only Black people, there were no other ones. So, with my grandmother, I pray to come back to Guadeloupe. And so, we go to Martinique, but it's very close to Guadeloupe. When I arrive, amongst my supposed kin, I arrive among Black people and, once again, I'm different. But it's the game, you know. Because it really is an endless thing, since, in the end, you'll always be someone else's stranger, you always exist in your own difference and solitude. So, I end up as the negro woman who thinks she's white. I'm called a Coconut. I'm called "negropolitan." I'm asked, "Who do you think you are? You think you are a white woman?" Because I roll my R's when I speak French. Because I don't understand everything that is being said in Creole. But, this time, I accept it. I accept it because I think to myself "Right, you need to earn it." But it's a long mental evolution. Because France wasn't my home. I go to the land of Black people, the land of my grandparents, of my parents. And, well, I need to adapt, I need to be accepted by others. Because, at the same time, you cannot buy people's friendship since they'll sense that you are trying to please them. You have to learn your place, even though it's very difficult, and you have to juggle a bit. "Where are you from? Oh, I see, you roll your R's." And suddenly you want to walk toward what you know, toward white kids in school. Do you understand what I mean, Élise? Maybe they were my bullies away from France.

Maybe you had, in the end, more things in common?

Exactly, Élise. But I know myself, my manners, the games I play, and at the same time… It was a mix. But it's also what's fascinating, because it's life, you know? Because you need to always challenge yourself. This is how I grew up.

So, you went to high school…

High school, I went to school, a private one, in Basse-Terre, the boarding school Saint Joseph de Cluny, with a uniform.

So, later, in Guadeloupe.

In Guadeloupe. In 8th grade, I'm in Guadeloupe because my parents didn't want to have me start a new year, to cut the year because my father's departure didn't take place during the school year.

But you'd lived in Martinique?

Yes, in 8th grade. And, very quickly, I ended up living with relatives in Basse-Terre so I could go to school there. And I continued my studies until the "Baccalauréat littéraire" (secondary school diploma with emphasis on literature). And, after this, I went to France to become a literature professor because I thought that it was the easy way out since I'm so passionate about literature, I love to write, I want to become a writer too, not just be a professor. For me, it's an easy solution.

Well, I don't know…

It's what I like. I can't picture myself doing anything else. I'm brilliant, I have excellent grades in French. I can become a professor of literature, no?
And then I arrive in the university of Nanterre and they tell me: Latin, linguistics, old French. I don't want to. . . I found myself surrounded by students who've studied Latin since the 6th grade. I got my Associates Degree but, at the time, they were "value units," called "VU." After the B.A., I told people I didn't want to keep bluffing with Latin, no. And so, I thought: "What am I going to do?" And this is when I crossed paths with this boy who was preparing to take the oral examination to get into a psychiatry nursing school. This is how my destiny took a turn. But I kept writing. And this way I gained more autonomy because, right away, I had a salary.

(…)

I never played at being a nurse, I was afraid of blood.

Oh no! So, how did you manage?

No, it's not the same, psychiatry is not the same, it's just tiny blood samples; small band aids, but it's in the head—the type of pain you cannot see, that isn't carved on the face. There are tortured beings, haunted, people who have worlds within… It was exactly what I needed. And this job gave me balance, because, you see, had I been just a writer, I think I would have lost touch with reality. It's this nursing job in psychiatry that allowed me to remain anchored. But also, to be close to people and human beings, to be much closer to human beings. This really balanced out my life on multiple levels, you know? Because it's thanks to this nursing job that I was able to devote time to writing. Because there were what we call brigades: nurses that would start at 6 am and finish at 2 pm. There's the afternoon team that works from 2 to 10 pm. So I worked at night for a long time, for 14 years in Guadeloupe, at night. So, I'd write at night. It was necessary to stay awake at night. I slept a little bit in the afternoon and I'd take care of my kids. I'd cook—they never ate at school. Yeah, I guess I really did it all! Then, afterward, I went to France, I worked day shifts only.

I see.

So there you go: writing every morning until 1 pm. After I saw the clock strike 1, I'd get ready for work at 2 pm. And, wow, what a luxury to have all this time, just for me,

all this time for me alone, from 6 am to… It's already like a day's worth of work. And, in the afternoon, I could really focus on my patients. I wasn't thinking about my characters, about the paths they would take—no, not at all. And then, in the evening, I'd go out with friends, to the cinema. Because we'd finish around 9 or 10 pm. And this job was really made for me.

And it really allowed you to balance your writing/professional life.

Very much so.

And to nourish you, even.

To nourish me too, to increasingly deepen and broaden my psychological perception of characters, every subtle facet of it, including the extremely thin aspects of them, you know? Remember when I was telling you about the arrogance of the child-as-professor with my grandmother, like a schoolteacher: "you don't know how to write this? But it's easy, listen: you have to apply yourself when you write letters…" And then, you land in this country in which you, in turn, become the illiterate one. But it's amusing, really. There, we can look at each other, just like that, and say: "Yeah, you're pretending too." But you learn a lot.

I see. And so, you studied in Paris…

In Villejuif.

And then you came back to Guadeloupe.

Yes, I came back to Guadeloupe in 1980. I started school in 77. I got my degree. I immediately left; I was pregnant with my son. He was born in 1980.

Oh, and you were married?

Yes, I was married.

To a Guadeloupean?

A Martinican.

Oh, a Martinican. And you lived in Guadeloupe…

We lived there for 20 years. I lived in Capesterre for 20 years, from 80 to 2000. And, in 2000, I went back to France. And, my goodness, I got hired by a psychiatric hospital. I worked there until 2009. And, in 2009, I came back here, and I worked until 2013. And then I retired. (…)

It was a dream to live in Marie-Galante, then…

Oh, yes, it was my dream.

And why Marie-Galante?

I think that it's an island that looks like my grandmother Julia, who embraced me. It's very rural.

Just a clarification. What did your husband do?

He was a psychiatric nurse. I met him in Villejuif, a Martinican.

I see, and you had two kids?

Two kids, a boy and a girl.

What do they do now?

Well, my son writes, actually, but he writes SLAM and poetry. He just published something. And my daughter is a schoolteacher.

Ah, I see. She made it! [*Laughs*]

She made it, she bears the title of "teacher" [*laughs*], that infamous status symbol!

And they live in Guadeloupe?

In Guadeloupe, yes. Teacher!

And so, why did you go back to France?

Ah yes, because I had to break things off with my ex-husband. It was very difficult. I went away, I left the home, I left everything. I left with my kids. We went to France. And, in fact, my daughter was staying with some friends' in Réunion at the time, so instead of coming back to Guadeloupe, we decided to meet in France. My son was gone at the time because he was settling in to start university, so I thought to myself: It can't just be me and my husband. I can't, it was unbearable. So, I decided to go back because it was very tense and everything. Because he'd married a nurse…

And you got a divorce?

Yes, I did.

INTERRUPTION

In 2000, I decided to go. I settled in Paris with my kids. And there, I did everything to find a job. This is how I was hired by the Esquirol hospital. They took me in with all my levels of experience. Then I found an apartment in Paris. I enrolled my kids in school, and there you go, life went on… Until 2009.

Yes. And then, you decided to come back here…

Yes, but I used to come here at least 3 or 4 times a year, specifically to look for a plot of land until I purchased one in 2005. And then, I had this house built here. And I'm happy because, well, I love this land, I love this island, the dimensions of this island, everyone is so friendly. I don't know if you have noticed, people are very informal around here,. Everyone greets everyone. I really love this island, it's very welcoming!

Okay, let's talk about publications. So, your first novel,* The Drifting of Spirits*, in 1993, in the "Serpent à plumes" edition…

But before this… The first publication, Élise! So, I write, I write novels,. There are 400 pages. And, at the time, there are no computers, so I use a typewriter. I write, I want to become a writer. I am a nurse, but I write, I continue writing. I write, it's my life's goal, I'm married…

But you do not send anything out for publication?

Of course: I do, I send things out, but they're sent back.

In what year did you start sending things? I mean, more or less.

Let's see… 1982, it was important that, when I turned 30—30 years old—it was important that I had published a book. And so, at some point, I was writing and so I sent things to Parisian publishing houses: Grasset, Seuil, Gallimard. For me, that's where I needed to send things. I didn't want to self-publish something because I thought that would be too easy, that there ought to be a publisher who believes in you. That's really it, I'm not complacent when it comes to these sorts of things. And so, I sent my manuscripts out, and they sent them back.

Did they explain why they wouldn't accept them?

Well, Simone Gallimard, one day, wrote this long letter to me, wherein she told me that she sensed that there was something there. She gave me some pointers, which I followed. And I wrote *The Drifting of Spirits*. But, before this, when I was still writing *The Drifting of Spirits.* I sent it, and it was rejected by the publishers, always the same ones. And then, there was "Le Serpent à Plumes" which, back then, had a short stories review – I'm sure you know it – a periodical featuring short stories from the whole world. There were issues organized by theme, country… So, here you have "Le

Serpent à Plumes." Me, I had entered a short story competition organized in Guadeloupe and had won first prize. It became the book *Paroles de terre en larmes*. Have you seen it? I got first prize, in Guadeloupe. The women writers who sponsored this event were, of course, Maryse Condé, Simone Schwarz-Bart. There was also a big party at the departmental level in my honor. But it was a jury that chose the winner. They had received 187 short stories. And the first prize was to be published with Editions Hatier.

What year was this?

In 87. So, this was my first publication. And, you know, the title of the collection takes after the short story that won the prize. So, it was called *Paroles de terres en larmes* (Words from a crying earth). I was my short story. In fact, I had sent in three, because it was anonymous. I sent in three, and all three of them were selected for the collection. And so, I thought to myself: "Well, I mean, come on." Professionals were telling me to keep going, so it's definitely encouraging. And after this, Raphael Confiant and Ralph Ludwig contacted me because, at last, my name got some recognition. He asked me: "Well, do you have a short story?" And I pulled a chapter from *The Drifting of Spirits*, which had been rejected, and I sent it to Editions Seuil, I think. So, I sent it. After this, Le Serpent à Plumes, with its short story publication, asked me: "Gisèle Pineau, would you happen to have a short story for our forthcoming collection on the Caribbean, for the Caribbean?" I said "Oh, really" and they replied: "Yes, Glissant and Chamoiseau will be part of it." So, me? I was over the moon! I told them: "Yes, of course! Of course, I have a short story, of course!" I looked for a chapter from *The Drifting of Spirits*, I changed the beginning so that it told a story. One chapter, published, published! (…) And Pierre Astier, who is the director of Le Serpent à Plumes, said to me: "Gisèle, from now on, we're going to publish novels, books. So, do you have a book?" And I said, "Ah, yes, I do have a book, and, in fact, I wanted to share something with you. Well, I sent you a chapter which was already published in your collection." He said: "Really?" And, finally, I sent them *The Drifting of Spirits* which they published. It was the first book published by Serpent à Plumes. And, with this book, we won *Elle*'s Grand Prix des Lectrices as well as the Carbet Prize, from the Caribbean, presided over by Édouard Glissant, in 93. So, this was really…

The beginning, the Great Beginning!

The Great Beginning. But I've always sent my books through the mail, and doors eventually opened. And this competition—because it only happened once—was a competition called "Écriture d'îles" (Writing of islands), and there was no repeat occurrence. Sometimes, I see jury members again and I ask them: "What about the others? What became of them?" And the others did not continue… So, I'm happy, you see, this was my path. This is how I was published for the first time. Later, Le Serpent à Plumes and I had disagreements and I signed with Stock, and I won many prizes.

Yes, every novel got a prize.

Yes, it was nice.

So, with Stock, did you sign a contract for one novel, or multiple? How does it work?

Was it for one novel, I'm not sure… Yes, that's it: two or three novels. It was *Macadam Dreams*, *Exile: According to Julia*, and *L'arbre prête aux oiseaux* ("The Tree lends to birds"), and also *Femmes des Antilles: Traces et voix* ("Women of the Antilles: Traces and Voices"). (…) And also my project. How I wanted it… Well, it was for the commemoration of 150 years since the abolition of slavery, in 98. "What are they going to say?" I thought. They are going to talk about the enslaved, he will be a character, a shadow, just like that—the enslaved, the enslaved. I wanted him to have a voice, I wanted people to imagine that there were people there—that's what interested me: to show women. Because I thought: "I'm not a history professor, but I'm a writer, I must do something." (…)
So, for me, it was important for me to show myself, not to remain silent, not to stay on the sidelines and let specialists, big-shot historians speak, let them share their knowledge, what they know. I wanted to bring it back to the human, but also to what can touch a reader, touch a person, a human being. Someone who will think: "Oh, wow." When you read a story, when you name a story, when you name characters—you exit the realm of the rational and the cerebral and you enter the emotional dimension, the very flesh of what animates us, you know! "A person! This happened to a *person*! It's a human being, a human being." Because you can picture people walking, just like that, an entire colony in Africa, simply ransacked. But when you start taking the time to imagine how each and every single one of these people had a life that got suddenly cut off—each had dreams like getting married, had a culture, had a small goat that provided nourishment, had parents. When you start putting the human back into an emotional context, then you are shaken. You start thinking: "Well, this is what we did. We forgot that it was about human beings." It's really the whole project of the book—to show humanity, humanity staining humanity, humanity denying humanity and, in the process, disavowing its own humanity. Because, when a human being forgets that he or she has another human being in front of them, and they enter violence, ferocity, an unspeakable barbarity, well… right there, they start questioning themselves and they justify everything by softening the edges and sugarcoating everything but… at what cost? This person's God, this church, this law—you invoke laws, laws that were made by men, motivated by profit, and you will justify your actions with all kinds of excuses. And, at the same time, this type of logic truly is a kind of logic of an insane person—at least, this is what it reminds me of. It reminds me of the very organized delirium of patients… The delirium of persecution: the patient thinks that, well, someone came and opened the curtains a certain way when it used to be opened like that, so it must mean this, or it must mean that. For me, a human being walks away from humanity when they start making weapons, when they murder. When, today, people make weapons in factories, it's because they serve a

purpose—they aren't toys. When you actually make plastic toys for kids, you know, like plastic guns… What's the purpose? I don't understand… So, I'm against any form of violence and, really, through my job, I have learned about the power of simple communication with people. In the end, I think that human beings insult their intelligence when they become violent, when they don't communicate. We all have words that allow us to share. And, when I tell a story, I believe that I am addressing a human being I might not be able to meet. You know, Élise, I meet you—we have met because we *had* to meet! Because you were looking to meet me! So, this is really what animates me. I think I'm very, very lucky to have this power to communicate, this gift, what was given to me, and that I have worked hard to better my style, my talent! To find my voice, my own voice, to be authentic—really, this is particularly important to me. To spend so much time in solitude. Otherwise, it's not worth it, it does not make sense. And so, you need to reach humans! To write, really, against barbarity, domination, violence. (…)

Yes… And then, you publish with Mercure.

Yes, with Mercure de France. Because Editions Stock changed, since Claude Durand left Stock. He left and his place was taken by a young editor, Jean-Marc Roberts, who, unfortunately, passed away. Claude Durand had been my editor, an editor I really liked. He also passed away, unfortunately. So, Claude Durand used to publish authors from Haiti, Mauritius, countries and territories that are not metropolitan France. I will not say that Guadeloupe is a country or a land, but it's an elsewhere. It's not standard French, metropolitan French. So, it has a color, a rhythm, a way of writing French which is also fascinating. And it also has a different imaginary. So, Jean-Marc Roberts, I think, pushed away every Haitian, Mauritian, or Martinican author—they all left. And he also narrowed the circle to a very condensed Parisian kernel by publishing extremely Parisian authors like Christine Angeot. Well, he passed away, so I don't mean to… He continued publishing a Greek author, Vassilis Alexakis. The authors who were not particularly in vogue, however, were let go. Everyone rushed to find a publisher and I got very lucky to be welcomed into Mercure de France, which brings me back to my very first novels with her mother's letter, Simone Gallimard's letter, who, by the way, found my name in her mother's files—since she took over her mother's publishing house. She said to me: "Gisèle, we already had your address on file."

I see. And how did you get in touch with them?

With Isabelle Gallimard?

Yes.

Let's see… When *Devil's Dance* was refused twice. For *Devil's Dance*, it was in the middle of my divorce, my change of home, my change of job, my change of hospital, oh boy!… And this really was the last thing I thought could happen, my editor letting

me go. I needed to change this too. Still in 2000… So, Jean-Marc Roberts told me: "I'm sorry Gisèle but, no, this needs one year's worth of work." It had never happened to me before, so I said: "Oh, well, okay." So, for an entire year, I worked, worked, worked—revising the text. After a year, I brought him the book and he told me I needed to work on it for another three months! So, then, I told him that I did not want to, that I could not even look at it anymore. You see, it's always the same with such exhausting work like this—after a while, you just vomit the text out, you've read too much, and you can no longer distinguish the good from the bad. You have no critical distance! And I told him: "Well, you can go ahead without me, this isn't working out for me." So, I brought my book to Gallimard and, from there, it went really fast. An editor, Jean-Marie Laclavetine, called me: "No, there already are some… Some Martinican authors, you will be a little bit… You won't be treated well, you won't be prioritized because… well." But Isabelle Gallimard got interested in my text. And that's when I was welcomed…

What about then? Did she have a more women-writer-oriented agenda?

Women writer… Yes, she publishes women. She publishes a lot of women, and, at any rate, there are a lot of women who write. But she doesn't really care about this, you know? She only sees writers. She was not a feminist editor or anything. But it was great! It was great until now… I'm working on my new novel.
(…)

Yes, okay, so… Another question. I was wondering if being a woman had helped you or not in your career as a writer, or if it had no impact whatsoever?

It did not particularly help me.

As in: it rather was a hurdle…

So, there was this author once who, when I published *Exile: According to Julia*, said: "*We* are fed up with grandma stories." We were on this panel together and this jerk told me this… Some authors can be so condescending—so condescending…

Yes, because your approach was perhaps more personal.

I'm not sure… I think that each author is unique and writes with so many things. And, at the same time, it's like a liberation, a voyage.

But do you think you were gauged differently because you were a woman writer?

No, no. With editors you mean?

Yes.

No, not at all. There is a type of position adopted by Antillean writers, I noticed, which consists in behaving more like an essayist—to theorize and to speak "in the name people." Me, I can surely and more easily speak about myself because it's what or who I know best, but I cannot speak for other people. I talk about what I observe, I talk about what upsets me, what makes me think, what hurts me—but I don't position myself as someone who can speak in the name of an entire population, that's all. I'm not a spokesperson, or a standard-bearer, and I claim this freedom to be myself with my own story. One day, this Antillean author told me that he would never include snow in his novels. I told him: "I'm sorry, but there was snow in my childhood."

Yes, of course! And, on that note, I have another question about your relationship with other writers from the Caribbean. I read in one of your interviews that you are rather independent…

Yes, I sort of keep it to myself. (…) But, you know, when I wrote *Drifting of Spirits*, it's a book I wrote to tell my connection to a country, to Guadeloupe. When I wrote *Drifting of Spirits*, it was in the middle of the "créolité" movement, which was a very popular movement. So, I thought that I, too, could write. It was my most Creole part, very Creolist. But after all this, I took some distance from this type of writing. It was particularly easy for me to write this way, and at the same time, it was a way for me to express my own love for Guadeloupe, for the country. To say that, even though I was born in Paris, I'm a child of the country, of the countryside, that I know it. And this, really, was my biggest challenge. It was my own way of being in this kind of créolité, to be in the innermost part of Guadeloupean countryside. I love it, I loved writing.

And afterwards, why did you move away from it?

Because it wasn't my real voice. It was not my natural voice. V.O.I.C.E.[16] I want to write with every bit of myself, in total freedom—I don't want to force myself to Creolize every sentence, every word, to add hot sauce [*laughs*] in order to call it authentic. This was perhaps worth it in the nineties but, you know, at that point I didn't feel like writing this way, even though I really like all the images it comes with. But I practice them in moderation, moderately. So, you know, you can tell that you're in the country, in the Caribbean, in a Creole-speaking milieu, but I don't insist on it too much.

(…)

I also read that you do not define yourself as a feminist…

No, it says a lot… And, you know, it's easy to say "yes." I mean, I am a woman. I am a human on this earth. Because, if I define myself as a feminist, I'm afraid of excluding others, like children.

[16] In French, Pineau uses the word "voix" (voice) which is a homonym of "voie" (path) so she spells the word out in order to elucidate the meaning. This cannot be translated adequately in English.

Yes, but did you have connections with feminist movements? Or not at all?

Not really, no… But, I mean, there are causes to defend. Because, you know, you have to look around you. Everybody knows that there are children who are sold into prostitution by their family around the world. Feminist? No, what I look at, first and foremost, is misery and poverty—the misery of migrants—before waving any feminist flag. There are human beings. I saw that some women carry babies… You have to defend every cause and I don't make any one more important than another. I mean, I thank those who fought for freedom and every human being who fought for liberties, for more respect toward others. But, in the end, I don't want to lock myself in place. I don't want to have another label. And, for me, it's a form of honesty because it's a way of protecting myself. "Look at her, she's a feminist." I mean, yes, when I do literary events, someone always tells me: "Ah, Gisèle Pineau, you write about women, women's struggle…" So, women who have been beaten and raped—yes, I talk about that. Yes, I talk about women. I talk about human beings who have been abused, human beings who have been oppressed. This interests me because it's a real topic. And if my quill can help in any way, I'd rather dip it in this type of ink. But, it's not an insult.

And you also do not support any particular political movement… Nor do you have any relationship with politics?

Not at all. No, because when you start growing in renown, people will very quickly use you as a puppet. You become used. "Her name… Say something…" And I would rather stay here in Marie-Galante, not to show myself—to remain in a space of creation, joy, the joy of my own creation, in the bliss of creating something, that's it. And to choose. Not to force myself to go… "Ah, yes, this political person does this, perhaps I can gain something from it." I don't want to compromise myself.

(…)

Do you consider yourself to be more of a French writer, a French Guadeloupean writer, a Francophone writer, or a world-literature writer?

World-literature?

Yes.

I mean, would you ask this question to… Amélie Nothomb, for instance? That she is a world-literature author?

Well, yes, she is francophone.

To whom do we ask these types of questions? Would you ask these questions to an American writer? But why do we ask these questions? I mean, it's interesting… but we are trapping people! I'm a free bird…

Yes…

No but I mean, I'm not upset, you know! I'm interested, I'm interested! I see the value in it! Is it because I'm Black? Because of where I come from? I have a European passport! Élise, when they created European passports, I went to the airport, I did not know where to go because it was either "European citizen" or "Foreign citizen," and I thought to myself "Where do I go?" I mean, it's true, this question of identity is very interesting! I am Guadeloupean, yes, I live in Marie-Galante. I was born in Paris, I am Parisian, I have this Parisian side. I like Paris, I love Paris. I feel tenderness for Paris. I like to go shopping in Paris. I am rooted in Guadeloupean culture, I cook, I cook well. I cook with vegetables, with spices. But here, francophone, no, it's… Francophone, no. I write with the languages I know, Creole and French. I can understand English, so I could insert one or two English words in my texts. But I write with all the freedom I am imparted with. Francophone… I mean, come on, it's a fabricated word. French, okay, I speak French. I love the French language, I have dictionaries. I will go look for forgotten words. I put words together, like this. This is the bliss of creation. If it means being Francophone, to speak French, to write with the French language by mixing French and Creole languages together—pairing words together that are not usually juxtaposed, like this, by juggling with words in order to create art, to create beauty. This is also my goal, because I want it to be beautiful. Beautiful in a meaningful, deep way. I mean, beauty, I am seeking beauty. So, I love the French language, it is my own language, my own. It is this language which allows me to express myself and to really go beyond what I want to say—to weave stories about nuanced emotions with very fine threads. So, Francophone, Guadeloupean, woman writer. I know, today, that writing is within me. Writing is something that is necessary to me because, when I don't write, when I am in between two books—when one book is about to be published and I am deeply thinking about a different book—then I have so many questions and I become a little bit lazy. Do I want to start working again like a brute? Do I want to spend hours in solitude instead of going to the beach or watch soap operas on television? And then, the idea comes, it rises, it imposes itself, it takes more and more space, it haunts me—the idea is there, right there. The characters, they want to emerge, they balloon, just like that. And I become a little tormented between, well, a book which just came out, maybe for a year or so—a book I promoted a little. People sometimes invite me to literary events and I go. But afterwards comes this moment, this pit, this cavity: "Will I be able to write? Will it come again? Is it meaningful? Why would it be meaningful?"… And, once I've decided, I become happy, I find my joy again. Before that, I sink a little because it's always very stressful, but once I start, when the story comes, it sorts of leaps. Then I am joyful because I recover my writing time… Yes, that's it, I recover my joy. And I think: "Yes, I am a woman, it's true. I am a woman. I love telling stories where feminine characters become who they are, stories with family secrets." But I am *this* writer, who is peopled by her own

characters. I don't know when I will stop writing but, you know, Francophone, French… Yes, on Wikipedia it says "French writer"—that's what it says on Wikipedia, "French writer." Sometimes, when I'm in France, I go to a bookstore and books from Antillean writers are sometimes placed in the African literature section… I mean, never in French literature, mind you. It's "The Americas" or "Caribbean"… But "French" is difficult...

APPENDICE 4. Interview with Yanick Lahens

Entretien avec Yanick Lahens, à Pétionville au restaurant « Le quartier latin », le 8 juin 2018 à 11h15.

Alors, si vous pouviez me parler un peu de vos origines familiales, ce que faisaient vos parents, vos grands-parents…et puis je sais que vous avez grandi une partie en France… :

Pas grandi, j'ai fait la fin de mes études en France, mais j'ai grandi ici en Haïti.

D'accord, d'accord et vos parents…

Mes parents haïtiens, grand-parents haïtiens. Je crois que mes grands-parents sont les premiers qui sont venus à Port-au-Prince d'une ville province. Ma mère a grandi donc une partie, la toute petite enfance au Gonaïves, mais après elle a été à Port-au-Prince tout le temps. Mon père était d'une autre région. Et lui, il a fait la fin de l'école secondaire et depuis, nous sommes des gens de Port-au-Prince.

Et quelle était leur profession ?

Mon père était économiste. Ma mère a commencé à faire des études, elle était douée en dessin, elle est douée en plusieurs choses : Dessin, cuisine. A un moment donné elle a eu une bourse, elle est partie en France. Quand elle est revenue, elle a commencé à faire plus la cuisine commercialement, pâtisserie, cuisine et puis elle a fait toute sa vie dans la gastronomie.

D'accord. Et elle avait fait des études jusqu'à quel niveau ?

Ah à l'époque, c'était le brevet supérieur. Donc elle a fait des études jusqu'au brevet supérieur. Mon père a fait des études, bon il était très brillant, bon parce que c'était pas des familles qui avaient beaucoup d'argent. Il a été lauréat, il a eu aussi une bourse à la faculté des sciences économiques.

Et ses parents faisaient quoi ?

Ah ben ses parents étaient instituteurs. Et sa mère était plus commerçante. Lui comme il était lauréat à la faculté des Sciences Economiques, il a eu une bourse, il est parti en France. Il a fait sa spécialisation en France pendant 5 ans, il est jamais revenu.

Spécialisation jusqu'au doctorat ?

Oui jusqu'au doctorat.

Ah oui d'accord. Il a fait le doctorat et après il est revenu ?

Exact.

Pour travailler comme économiste ou professeur ?

Les deux.

Et il a travaillé pour le gouvernement ?

Oui, il a travaillé pour le gouvernement mais il était d'abord professeur. Il a eu comme étudiant, Jean-Claude Fignolé qui me parlait toujours de lui ; je crois Franketienne aussi.

Ah oui. Et votre mère, ses parents faisaient quoi ?

Mon grand-père était militaire, il était capitaine de l'armée. Et ma grand-mère maternelle…et ben c'est elle qui a initié ma mère à tout ce qui est cuisine, pâtisserie ; elle était très forte.

D'accord. Elle avait aussi son commerce ?

Oui, oui jusqu'à la fin, donc ma mère a un petit peu pris le relai. Là ma mère faisait des choses beaucoup plus professionnelles.

Et elle avait un restaurant ?

Non c'était sur commande, pas de restaurant. Elle est une des 1ère à avoir fait…pour les mariages elle construisait des choses et puis elle faisait un gâteau très spectaculaire donc les gens adoraient ça ! Voilà.

Et vous, vous avez grandi à Port-au-Prince ici.

Alors, je suis née chez moi, enfin chez mes parents à Pétion-ville. Mais Pétion-ville à l'époque c'était un lieu de villégiature, les rues n'étaient pas asphaltées. Il y avait très peu de construction. C'était un village, en dehors de Port-au-Prince. et je suis née chez moi à la rue Faubert.

La rue Faubert…

Oui, là où se trouve la Sogebank. Juste là où il y a le parking de la sogebank c'était la maison familiale, du côté de ma mère.

Et donc vous avez fait vos études primaires, secondaires ici à Pétionville ?

Non à l'école des sœurs de Sainte Rose de Lima, c'est des religieuses

A Port-Au-Prince. Il fallait descendre alors

Oui, mais à l'époque (on parlait de cela hier), il y avait une beaucoup plus grande mixité, moi je prenais une camionnette.

C'était comme les transports en commun,
Oui, les gens de tous les classes sociales se rencontraient, ce qui n'est plus le cas aujourd'hui. Je pense qu'il y a un recul de la mixité. Alors que non, à l'époque, je n'oserais pas demander à mes parents qu'ils me conduisent à l'école, jamais. Je marchais, je prenais la camionnette, je revenais chez moi.

Oui, oui. Il y avait moins de circulation aussi

Moins de circulation et il n'y avait pas autant cette densité de population qui fait que maintenant pour rentrer dans un tap tap il faut se battre le matin. Donc du coup forcément ça devient compliqué.

Et oui donc ceux qui ont les moyens préfèrent prendre la voiture

Voilà. Donc il y a soit les espèces de petits bus, on a un abonnement qu'on paie par mois.

Ah ben ça c'est bien. Ça existe encore ?

Oui, oui ça existe beaucoup plus qu'avant.

Le lycée[17] aussi c'était au même endroit

Non non j'étais chez les religieuses. C'était pas le lycée. Parce que vous savez que l'Etat ne prend en charge que 10% des écoles, donc 90% des écoles sont des écoles privées ; plus ou moins bonnes écoles mais des écoles privées. Donc j'étais chez les religieuses, Saint Rose de Lima.

D'accord et ensuite vous êtes partie en France…

Oui. J'ai passé mon bac en France, et j'ai fait les études de lettres.

Et où ça en France ?

J'étais encore chez les religieuses, ça m'a poursuivi !

Mais où ?

[17] Confusion de ma part ici car en Haïti les lycées comme le lycée Alexandre Pétion sont des établissements publics et gratuits alors que les collèges sont des établissements privés qui offre un education primaire et /ou secondaire payante.

Ça s'appelait le cours du ? (inaudible). A Paris. Et puis j'ai fait la Sorbonne, Paris 3, ensuite Paris 4.

Donc là c'était dans les années 60 –70…

J'ai terminé en 77-78.

Des souvenirs particuliers de la France…

Ah si quand même beaucoup. C'est là où j'ai fait mes études, c'est là où j'ai rencontré beaucoup d'Haïtiens que je n'aurais certainement pas rencontré en Haïti. Donc j'ai découvert des tas d'aspects d'Haïti que je ne connaissais pas.

A Paris ?

Ah ben oui. D'abord les étudiants que je rencontrais, c'était souvent des gens qui étaient partis parce qu'ils avaient fait la grève en Haïti, beaucoup des exilés politiques, donc c'est tout un pan d'Haïti que je ne connaissais pas. Je peux dire aussi que j'ai beaucoup appris, moi aussi, sur Haïti à partir de la France.

Et c'était donc des étudiants qui faisaient leurs études ou…

Oui, il y en avait qui faisait leurs études. Il y en avait qui étaient beaucoup plus âgés que moi, qui en fait travaillaient. Mais tout le monde se regroupait et mon groupe d'âge, étudiants venant d'H., on avait relancé l'association des étudiants haïtiens à Paris, donc tout le monde se regroupait autour de cette association, ça a été un bon moment. Donc là il y avait toutes les tendances politiques, bon, ceux qui étaient très à gauche, à gauche, ceux qui n'étaient pas à gauche jusqu'à une certaine limite. Tout le monde s'est retrouvé et on a fait beaucoup d'activités.

Et alors quels types d'activités ?

Des activités culturelles, beaucoup. Des débats, on avait avec nous Hervé Denis, qui était, qui avait travaillé dans la troupe de Jean-Marie Sérault, donc c'était quand même quelqu'un qui avait une très belle formation en théâtre, donc on montait des spectacles. Il y avait beaucoup de choses. Je me souviens aussi de la projection de Gouverneur de la Rosée quand Telvic a fait gouverneur de la rosée, il y a eu une projection dans le cadre de l'association.

Et il y avait des débats politiques aussi ?

Oui mais en fait on faisait plus les débats politiques à côté car on ne voulait pas gêner un peu le fonctionnement de l'association. Mais on faisait des débats politiques oui. Il y avait des gens qui étaient… Serge qui était dirigeant de la Cimade, on accueillait les

réfugiés, il y avait les gens du PUCH, du parti communiste Haïtien qui étaient là. C'est là que j'ai rencontré René Théodore pour la 1ere fois. A l'époque, moi je ne savais même pas, il était carrément dans la clandestinité, donc il avait un nom d'emprunt quand il venait.

Est-ce que vous avez rencontré d'autres gens d'Afrique, de la diaspora ?

Ah oui, forcément quand on est l'école, moi j'étais très amis avec Nedim Durcel, qui est un romancier turc très très connu, on a été ami jusqu'à présent. Donc on étudiait même ensemble. J'avais des amis sénégalais, tunisiens, un peu de toutes les nationalités et français aussi.

D'accord, donc ça a été une expérience très formatrice… ?

Ah oui, oui très très formatrice. Et, une amie française qui est restée mon amie jusqu'à présent. Quand je vais en France, je loge chez elle. Oui vraiment une expérience d'ouverture, et en même temps une expérience, parce que c'est archi connu, souvent on découvre son pays quand on est à l'extérieur. Donc chaque fois que je reviens en Haïti, c'était une occasion pour moi d'aller creuser.

Oui on revient avec des yeux nouveaux.

Exactement.

Oui, oui. D'accord. Et donc vous êtes restée combien de temps pour les études ?

Jusqu'au DEA. Donc ça fait combien d'années ? pas mal. 8 ans peut-être.

Et ensuite vous êtes rentrée…

Oui

Ça c'était votre choix…

Ah oui absolue. Comme je pouvais rentrer, je l'ai fait. Il y a des gens qui ne pouvaient pas rentrer donc ils sont restés. Mais je pouvais, donc j'ai choisi de rentrer.

Avec quelle perspective…

De travailler en Haïti. J'ai enseigné pendant pas mal de temps.

A l'école normale …

Oui une école secondaire pas longtemps. Mais surtout enseigné à l'université.

Donc là vous étiez prof. de littérature ?

Oui littérature. Parce que j'avais des études de lettres. Donc c'était plus littérature haïtienne, littérature et société, littérature comparée.

D'accord. Et là c'était une expérience intéressante aussi…

Ah très, très. En fait bon quand on enseigne, on redécouvre des choses aussi. Et puis ça m'a permis de voir l'évolution de la société haïtienne, à tous les point de vue sociologique, politique, économique.

Parce que l'Ecole normale, c'est une institution publique ?

Oui

Donc vous faisiez partie de la fonction publique ?

Oui

Et vous avez des frères et sœurs ?

Une sœur, un frère.

Et eux, ils ont fait quoi ?

Elle médecine, et lui ingénieur. Mais il s'est reconverti au sport, à la politique sportive.

Politique sportive c'est à dire ?

Enfin politique oui, parce que bon il n'est pas un sportif. Il s'intéresse beaucoup plus à l'organisation du secteur du sport. Il est au comité olympique haïtien, mais euh c'est un peu compliqué de travailler de manière indépendante et de pouvoir influencer, très compliqué, même de pouvoir faire passer une loi sur le sport c'est devenu très compliqué. Donc il est devenu presque un expert international maintenant, sur la Caraïbe. Il a beaucoup travaillé pour l'intégration de la Guadeloupe Martinique dans les compétitions locales. Puisqu'avant rattaché à la France, ce qui est complètement ridicule. Il a beaucoup travaillé sur ça. Donc beaucoup de choses et maintenant il est sur l'Amérique latine aussi. Donc il est pratiquement devenu un expert.

Consultant indépendant.

Oui sur la politique sportive. Il est basé en Haïti.

Et votre sœur ?

Elle, elle a fait médecine en H. Elle est partie faire sa spécialisation en France en gériatrie. C'est la 1ere femme, le 1ER medecin gériatre en H. Elle a professé ici. Puis au bout d'un moment elle m'a dit non, moi je m'en vais et elle est partie s'installer aux Etats-Unis, en Floride.

D'accord… Et est-ce que vous avez toujours pensé devenir écrivain ou c'est quelque chose qui est venu plus tard?

Bon j'écrivais des petites choses mais pas vraiment l'intention de publier.

A partir de quel âge ?

Je m'en souviens plus. J'ai publié…je crois c'est en lisant un peu Marie Chauvet que ça a déclanché quelque chose et après avoir écrit mon essai « Entre l'ancrage et la fuite ». Là je me suis dit : « bon tu te jettes à l'eau !».

Ah d'accord. Donc c'était plus tard quand…

Plus tard. Je devais être dans la trentaine…

Vous exerciez comme professeur déjà…

Ah oui, ah oui, pendant que j'étais prof.

Est-ce quand vous étiez jeune jeune, ici en H. ou après à l'université vous écriviez un peu ?

Depuis l'école, des concours de poèmes, des choses comme ça, mais que je ne montrais pas, que je gardais pour moi.

Vous n'aviez pas l'idée d'en faire quelque chose ?

Non ce n'était pas dans mon projet à ce moment-là.

Et les lectures, vous lisiez beaucoup j'imagine, surtout en faisant des études de lettres…

Beaucoup. J'avais pas vraiment le choix. Donc je le faisais par goût et par profession aussi. Ça aide forcément.

Est-ce que vous aviez une spécialité à l'université ou est-ce que vous lisiez de tout ?

Ah pas vraiment, moi je faisais de tout…parce que vu un peu les carences qu'il y a, on est obligé de suppléer à beaucoup de choses, mais je faisais de la littérature haïtienne.

J'ai fait de la littérature comparée, Marie Chauvet, Faulkner, j'ai fait Camus…tellement de choses.

Mais quand vous étiez étudiante…est-ce que vous vous étiez spécialisée ?

Littérature comparée avec Etiemble. A ce moment-là, Etiemble était encore vivant, donc j'ai fait mon master avec lui, mon année de maitrise et l'année de DEA, j'ai fait plusieurs choses : j'ai fait sur le roman, avec Chevrier la littérature francophone, Liliane Kestelot. A l'époque le DEA , on avait 4 Cours. Et pour chaque cours, on devait rendre un essai.

Et le mémoire pour la maîtrise, c'était sur quoi ?

C'était sur la littérature haïtienne.

Ah donc vous étiez déjà bien…

Oui tout à fait, mais c'était difficile de trouver quelqu'un à l'époque. Finalement, il a appris avec moi, il découvrait la littérature haïtienne avec moi, parce que lui c'était le spécialiste, un des premiers de littérature africaine, donc il découvrait la littérature haïtienne avec moi.

Est-ce que vous auriez eu des perspectives en France pour enseigner…

A l'époque, ah non je n'ai même pas cherché.

D'accord. Et vous étiez la Seule haïtienne dans le DEA ?

Oui dans le DEA j'ai jamais été avec d'autres Haïtiens. Après j'ai rencontré des Haïtiens dans le circuit des Haïtiens. Il y avait une Haïtienne qui elle faisait des choses plus en biologie et en sciences de l'environnement puisque ça commencait à l'époque. Ensuite il y avait une autre Haïtienne Patricia Benoit, qui est devenu cinéaste, qui fait des petits films. Mais j'étais vraiment la seule femme.

Et donc il n'y avait rien sur la littérature haïtienne…

Rien ou très peu de choses. Moi j'ai fait mon affaire toute seule quoi.

Et Caraïbe Martinique Guadeloupe, non plus

Non :il y avait …peut être mais pas dans les séminaires que j'ai suivis moi. Jacques Chevrier je ne l'ai même pas eu comme enseignant, je l'ai choisi pour faire ma maitrise mais j'ai suivi un cours avec Etiemble qui donnait une idée générale de la littérature comparée, donc c'est plus général, la méthodologie, c'était vraiment un grand ponte de la littérature comparée et j'ai fait mon mémoire avec lui.

Maryse Condé : elle n'y était pas encore. Je crois qu'elle a donné quelque cours mais cela devait être plus tard

Ah non, non je ne l'ai pas eu comme prof.

Est-ce que vous lisiez les écrivains de la Caraïbe, Aimé Césaire…

Forcément, obligatoirement. Jusqu'à présent, j'ai les éditions Présence Africaine de tout ce monde-là. J'ai tout découvert à ce moment-là.

A Paris. Vivace à ce moment-là.

Ah oui. Les discussions entre…les Haïtiens c'était beaucoup plus politique, quelque fois très pointu, on restait autour d'une table dans un café des heures. Tout ça j'ai découvert en France par les livres.

Un peu sur les mouvements intellectuels

Je n'ai jamais milité dans un parti et je pense que je mourrai sans avoir milité dans un parti. Mais j'étais proche de beaucoup de ces partis qui étaient représentés, des partis politiques qui avaient leurs antennes à ce moment-là en France. Je les fréquentais comme je fréquentais d'autres gens qui n'étaient pas dans les partis et voilà.

Et comme auteur qui vous a le plus influencé pour votre carrière d'écrivain :peut être Marie Chauvet

Certainement. Jacques-Stephen Alexis aussi. Jacques Roumain oui.

Vous les avez découvert ici ?

Jacques Stephen Alexis, c'est ici. Avant de partir, j'étais toute jeune. Et puis Jacques Roumain dans la même foulée.

Qu'est-ce que vous lisiez jeune jeune ?C'était plutôt la littérature classique française ou de tout… ?

Littérature classique française, quand on est à l'école ici, on avait pas vraiment le choix. Maintenant c'est en arrivant en France que j'ai découvert la littérature américaine que j'aime bcp.

Avec la littérature comparée.
Enormément.

Et vous avez continué en étant professeur ici.

Oui voilà.

Ok. Donc pour l'écriture, ça a été d'abord des nouvelles… ?

Oui. D'abord un essai puis des nouvelles et un roman

Oui dans la maison du père. Mais les nouvelles ont été publié…

Il y a eu l'harmattan d'abord. *Tante Résia*, c'était en 94.
La petite corruption en 1999, à peu près la même année que *Dans la maison du père.*

Et pourquoi vous aviez choisi la nouvelle au départ ?

Ben j'sais pas c'est ce qui est venu...

D'accord. Et pour être publié, c'était difficile ou comment ça s'est passé ?

Ah les nouvelles, j'ai juste envoyé à l'Harmattan. Mais l'Harmattan ne paie pas, j'ai jamais eu de droits d'auteurs,

Non ?
Jamais jusqu'à aujourd'hui.

Et là vous connaissiez quelqu'un à l'Harmattan ?
Non j'ai juste envoyé comme ça …

Et ils ont dit ok.

Oui. Et après *Dans la maison du père*, c'est un peu parei, le serpent à plume.

Ah oui je les ai rencontré à Paris l'année dernière…

Mais à l'époque, c'était Pierre Astier qui était agent littéraire.

Là vous le connaissiez ou vous avez envoyé comme ça ?

Non j'ai juste envoyé. Je crois qu'il recherchait, il faisait un petit recueil de nouvelles et j'avais envoyé une nouvelle.

Ah oui c'était pour leur revue thématique...

Et à partir de là, on a noué des liens et puis c'est après que je lui ai envoyé, à la suite de la nouvelle, j'ai envoyé le roman.

Et est-ce que vous avez eu des prix pour les nouvelles ?

Non. Le 1ER prix que j'ai eu, c'est pour *Dans la maison du père*, pas de prix pour les nouvelles.

D'accord. Et donc le passage au roman c'était…

Ce sont des constructions différentes. C'est vraiment faire sur le long terme. C'est comme courir un marathon ou un 100 mètres, c'est pas la même chose. C'est forcément plus de persévérance, plus de…il y a des gens qui sont incapables de faire les deux. Mais moi je peux faire les deux. Il y a des gens qui disent, jamais je pourrai plus écrire de nouvelles. Ça dépend. Là j'ai beaucoup plus écrit de romans mais rien ne dit que je pourrai pas…

La poésie ?

Non, je pense que je ne suis pas assez douée. Ah mais j'ai une grande admiration pour les poètes. Je lis beaucoup mais…

Qu'est-ce qui vous fait dire que vous n'êtes pas assez douée ?

J'ai pas essayé, j'ai pas éssayé non plus. Peut-être que je n'ai pas la forme de raisonnement… Il faut être aussi dans le non raisonnement aussi un peu... Et moi je suis souvent dans le raisonnement.

D'accord. C'est intéressant… Et donc le 1er roman, vous étiez encore professeur ?

Oui ah non, non, puisque j'ai laissé l'enseignement en 95. C'était en 1999 : non j'avais déjà laissé.

Et vous viviez de quoi ?

Ah ben, j'ai travaillé à un projet « Route de l'esclavage ».

Ah oui, oui. Et vous avez fait un passage…on revient un peu sur le parcours professionnel.

Avec Raoul Peck.

Et qu'est-ce qui vous a fait arrêter l'enseignement ?

Ah non, c'était compliqué. C'était compliqué …parce que la gestion de l'école, je trouvais, devenait anarchique. Elle l'est restée.

A quels niveaux ?

A tous les niveaux. J'ai fait partie du premier conseil de direction élu de l'école après le départ des Duvallier. J'étais même pas candidate à quoi que ce soit puisque j'aime pas trop ça. Les étudiants sont venus me chercher, Madame Lahens… vous êtes sûrs … ? oui il faut Mme Lahens. vous savez… j'ai dit d'accord mais et puis ça a très bien marché. On a réorganisé les départements, tout ça fonctionnait bien. J'ai fait rentrer beaucoup de gens. La première chose que j'ai faite, j'ai fait un accord avec l'université de Montréal parce que mon ami, Emile Ollivier était prof là-bas. C'était vraiment une bouteille à la mer et ça a drôlement bien marché. Et après quand je suis partie, ils ont arrêté.

Comme ça marchait, pourquoi vous êtes partie ?

Non non, ça ne marchait plus. Le programme canadien était pratiquement arrêté et ensuite euh… ben une espèce de …je sais pas moi le chaos administratif etc. J'ai dit aux étudiants, non, non, non. Donc, j'ai fait le mandat. Et puis après…waow c'était compliqué.

Donc vous avez cherché un autre travail…

Ah ben oui, comme je connaissais bien Raoul,

Oui d'accord Raoul Peck

Avec Raoul Peck, Philippe Dalembert qui est un écrivain aussi et moi. Philippe a été mon étudiant, une de mes premières promotions, et comme j'ai commencé à professer jeune, on avait peut-être 5 ou 6 ans de différence, donc on est devenu de très grands amis jusqu'à aujourd'hui.

Et là quel était votre rôle ?

J'étais chef de son cabinet.

Et concrètement, il s'agissait d'organiser…

Oui, comme lui, il organise très bien, c'est quand même un metteur en scène, il a l'esprit bien. les idées. C'était pas difficile de suivre tous les dossiers, la politique culturelle, comment on voyait ça. C'était un des derniers qui avaient une vision de la politique culturelle. Aujourd'hui, il n'y en a plus.

Et c'était sous Aristide ?

sous Préval.

Préval ok. Et quelle était la vision, il y avait beaucoup de projets j'imagine…

Ah ben beaucoup de projets, d'abord l'enseignements des arts dans les écoles, il y avait … restaurer des monuments du patrimoine et en faire des lieux culturels dans plusieurs départements. Il voulait aussi rénover l'Ecole nationale des arts, qui prendrait la suite d'études spécialisés en art pour les écoles secondaires. Tout ça est tombé à l'eau, hélas ! …

Et donc vous avez fait quand même deux ans ?

Avec Raoul Peck ? je ne pense pas que je suis restée tout ce temps là. Je suis pas restée jusqu'à la fin de son mandat. Et puis je suis aussi allé avec Laennec Hurbon qui est aussi un ami, au projet route de l'esclave.

Ah oui voilà, d'accord. Et là c'était intéressant ?

Très intéressant,

Et pendant combien de temps ?

Je me rappelle plus, peut être 2 ans. C'était très intéressant comme projet parce que là encore c'est tout un autre aspect de l'histoire de l'esclavage, du rôle d'Haïti, j'ai beaucoup appris. Et parallèlement, je ne sais plus à quelle année, on a été au comité de direction de chemin critique, une revue extrêmement importante, un moment de la pensée haïtienne fondateur.

Et là vous étiez à l'origine de la création de la revue ?

Laennec a été à l'origine mais j'étais du premier comité de rédaction. Ça a été extraordinaire, ça a été vraiment un grand moment.

Et c'est encore publié ?

Comme toutes les revues, ça ne dure pas éternellement. On a quand même tenu 6, 7 ans et avec des numéros qui sont des numéros de référence. Ensuite, parce qu'il y a eu des problèmes politiques. Mais là la revue a repris depuis l'année dernière, avec toujours Laennec, Michel Pierre Louis, d'autres personnes, mais moi bon. Je n'ai pas repris, puisque là je me consacre vraiment beaucoup plus sur mon travail.

D'accord. Et donc il y a eu la route de l'esclavage et après ?

Après non, après j'ai donné des cours, j'ai donné des séminaires, comme ça ça me faisait de l'argent. Et puis j'ai continué à écrire. A ce moment-là, j'ai commencé vraiment à écrire…

D'accord c'est ça. Donc vous avez dégagé du temps pour vous consacrer à l'écriture.

Oui parce que les enfants devenaient plus grands, donc j'ai commencé à avoir du temps.

Et vous donniez des séminaires ici en Haïti ?

Oui, oui en Haïti, à l'étranger pas vraiment, j'ai dû en donner un ou deux aux Etats-Unis, Guadeloupe Martinique une fois en Guadeloupe mais voilà.

Donc Serpent à plume. Et puis 2008, la couleur de l'aube.

Oui, j'ai mis du temps, j'ai pris du temps pour écrire. Et puis là c'était avec Sabine Wespiser

Voilà. Et comment vous avez découvert cette maison…

C'était un hasard. Il y a eu un évènement culturel à la citadelle. Mon mari était là, il y avait une amie commune qui me dit : « je vais te présenter quelqu'un. – ah bon voilà – peut-être que tu as un manuscrit. J'ai dit : - Ah oui j'ai un manuscrit,. » il me dit tu lui envoies et il me donne sa carte, tchac et c'est comme ça.

Par hasard.

Complètement.

Parce que c'est une maison d'édition récente, enfin des années 2000

créée en 2000, 2002.

2002. D'accord. Et depuis vous êtes restée avec …

Ah oui.

Donc vous avez signé un contrat.

A chaque fois mais je suis très contente, très très contente, je ne changerai pas, pour l'instant non, pas du tout. J'ai même eu des propositions mais ça ne m'intéresse pas.

Qu'est-ce qui vous fait que vous êtes vraiment satisfaite ?

Ben tout, tout. Il y a pas beaucoup d'auteurs, on est bien traité, elle prend soin de ses écrivains, Vraiment, je ne sais pas ce que j'irai chercher ailleurs, vraiment.

Et après il y a eu Guillaume et Nathalie, puis Bain de lune et Douce déroute

Oui et puis il y a eu *Faille*s aussi.

Ah oui Failles, écrit après le tremblement de terre. Qui a été écrit rapidement ?

très rapidement.

Donc chaque fois, c'était une expérience positive…

Oui.

Et j'imagine le prix Femina

Ah ben oui ça aussi. Franchement, je ne m'y attendais **absolument** pas. D'abord parce que l'année d'avant, il y a eu Leonora Miano qui avait eu le Femina. Ensuite, j'étais déjà sur le coup de cœur de 4 regroupements d'écrivains ; donc moi j'étais déjà très contente. Et euh je suis rentrée en H. Pendant mon séjour en septembre pour la promotion du livre, et puis un jour Sabine me dit : « tu es sur la liste du femina. » Je lui dis : « Tu plaisantes » « Je vais t'envoyer un article de journal, un lien. » Donc elle me l'a envoyé. On était ensemble à Strasbourg. Très bien, pour moi c'était bien. Et je suis rentrée en Haïti à la fin septembre. Je suis d'ailleurs allée au mariage de mon fils en Haïti à la fin septembre. Ça se déroulait, ça se déroulait. Et puis au bout d'un moment elle me dit ah ben il faut que tu rentres avant. J'ai dit mais c'est ridicule, jamais je n'aurais ce prix. Je devais y rentrer le mardi ou le mercredi. On devait proclamer le prix le lundi.
« Mais non, essaie d'arriver le dimanche ». Je lui dis : « mais non allez dépenser de l'argent pour changer le billet ». Puis bon j'ai dit : « si tu veux, je viens ; ça ne me dérange pas. » Et c'est comme ça que la veille, la veille, vraiment tranquille, pas du tout stressée ; elle, elle était très stressée, je l'ai eu quoi !

Oui, oui.

Non c'est une bonne nouvelle.

Et vos Livres sont beaucoup lu en H. ?

Oui parce que j'ai toujours eu la possibilité d'avoir des éditions haïtiennes au départ. J'ai négocié avec Sabine, comme ça les livres sont vendus 4 fois moins chers.

4 fois moins chers, d'accord. Et qui les impriment alors ?

Les éditeurs haïtiens.

Ah les éditeurs haïtiens. J'en ai d'ailleurs acheté un hier « la couleur de l'aube », un petit format

Orange ?

Oui.

Ça c'est toute une histoire. C'est la même édition Sabine Wespieser mais elle fait poche. Au départ quand le livre est paru, j'avais fait à compte d'auteurs avec les presses nationales, non à compte d'auteur…je sais plus…. Après *Failles*, c'était à compte d'auteur. C'est parti 2000 exemplaires mais rapidement.
Guillaume et Nathalie à compte d'auteurs. Et *Bain de lune,* elle me l'a fait à moitié prix en Haïti.

Ah d'accord. Donc c'est un imprimeur avec la couverture de SW

Non non, rien à voir la couverture. D'ailleurs, le texte *Failles*, maintenant c'est dans la collection poche de Sabine.

Ok et donc l'édition haïtienne est complètement différente. Mais cela permet d'avoir un prix beaucoup plus abordable. D'accord, donc il y a une bonne diffusion des livres ici.

Il y a quelqu'un qui s'occupe de la diffusion des livres aussi en dehors d'imprimer les textes. Il y a de jeunes maisons d'édition aussi, il y en a deux ou trois. Il y a quelqu'un qui s'occupe de diffusion. Donc quand il y a des évènements, elle prend les livres des éditeurs et puis elle les fait circuler.

D'accord. Mais excusez-moi, la publication ici en Haïti, c'est avec une maison d'édition haïtienne ou juste un imprimeur ?

Ça dépend. Si vous faites à compte d'auteur, vous allez chez un imprimeur. Si vous passez par une maison d'édition haïtienne, c'est une maison d'édition.

Et vous, vous faites quoi ?

J'ai fait les deux. Pour *La Couleur de l'aube* et *Failles,* j'ai fait moi-même. Et pour la maison d'édition, Legs editions, ils ont repris des nouvelles que j'avais écrites. Donc là, c'est eux qui se chargent de tout.

Et même de la diffusion.

De tout.

Et pour Bain de lune ?

Bain de lune, il y a une édition de poche au Seuil, donc le prix est plus abordable.

Ah d'accord, donc il y a une édition de poche au Seuil. Je ne savais pas, qui est diffusé même en France…

Oui, oui. Pour *Guillaume et nathalie*, aussi, il y a une édition du Seuil. Je pense que *Douces déroutes*, ils ont demandé aussi.

Au Seuil ?

Oui je crois, d'après ce que m'a dit Sabine.

Et Douce déroute ça a bien marché ? C'est tout récent. Vous étiez à Paris il y a pas longtemps…

Très Tout récent. Crevée là je suis revenue vraiment épuisée. J'ai fait un premier séjour de 15 jours en mars. Un 2ème séjour de presque 17 jours, ben je reviens là :épuisant.

Donc vous faites une tournée,

Non c'est fini là.

Mais quand vous étiez en France, vous faisiez une tournée dans les librairies ?

Librairies, radios, télévision, festival.

Et ça a bien marché ? parce que j'imagine que vous commencez à être connu là depuis Bain de lune ?

Oui, quand même, avant Bain de lune, et maintenant qu'il y a eu Bain de lune, oui.

Et ici en Haïti, vous allez faire des tournées ?

Non j'ai fait une émission avec Dangelo, des signatures à La pléaïde, des petites tournées en province aussi.

Oui. Donc maintenant vous vous consacrez complètement à l'écriture ?

Ah ben oui, je suis à la retraite, là je… c'est déjà beaucoup.

Oui, oui oui. Donc la publication, ça a été plu. Pour la réception critique, est-ce que vous vous intéressez aux critiques ?

Que l'on fait de mon livre ?

Oui oui.

En général, je ne regarde pas les émissions que j'ai faite, je ne les réécoute. J'avance. C'est fait, c'est fait

Mais au niveau des critiques littéraires…

Oui là je lis, je lis.

Est-ce que cela vous influence ou pas vraiment…

Non, mais je regarde quand même. Comment les gens voient. Souvent il y a des choses qu'on ne voit pas soi-même et que les autres voient. Heureusement. On apprend aussi sur soi.

Et des lecteurs, vous avez des retours des lecteurs aussi ?
Ah quand je suis en librairie oui, les gens réagissent, me disent ce qu'ils pensent, donc oui.

Et est-ce que vous voyez une différence entre la réception en France et la réception en Haïti ?

Il n'y a pas une grande différence mais souvent il y a des différences, forcément. Les gens ne vivent pas les mêmes réalités. Les gens en France projettent une certaine idée d'Haïti donc il faut toujours expliquer. Même les gens ici, il faut pas croire que les gens prennent tout le temps la distance qu'il faut par rapport à leur réalité. Donc bon…non mais c'est différent forcément.

Et dans les Caraïbes ou à l'étranger, est-ce que vous avez des retours ?

Bon dans les Caraïbes, on n'a pas tellement de liens, non pas vraiment. A l'étranger oui, il y a la publication en anglais. *Moonbath*, j'ai eu de bons retours, je peux pas me plaindre. Ça va. Bon c'était un peu nouveau pour les gens de lire quelque chose comme cela en Haïti.

Est-ce que vous avez des contacts avec d'autres écrivains ? en H, j'imagine

Oui. Le plus proche c'est Gary Victor avec qui je collabore, je travaille. Louis Philippe Dalembert beaucoup aussi qui est resté un ami. A l'étranger Russell Banks, que j'aime bien aussi, qui est devenu un ami parce que c'est un ami de Raoul Peck. Et oui, avec disons ces écrivains là j'ai un contact, j'échange oui. Gisèle Pinault on s'échange. C'est peut-être le petit trio.

Ok mais ce sont plus des relations personnelles ?

Aussi il y a les deux.

Etre une écrivain femme, est-ce que cela constitué un obstacle ou pas vraiment ?

Non, ici non. Là où la différence va jouer vraiment, c'est la manière dont les gens vont peut-être lire le texte, ils vont dire c'est un texte de femmes. Mais, pour écrire soi même, non.

Ni la publication ?
Non vraiment pas. Mais ça va se situer ailleurs, dans la réception, dans le fait que les gens disent ah il y a des personnages féminins…plutôt dans la réception.

Au niveau des critiques littéraires et au niveau des lecteurs aussi…

Je pense qu'en H. les gens lisent les écrivains femmes autant que les écrivains hommes, aujourd'hui. Il y a un auteur qui fait toujours des gros scores, c'est Gary, parce que bon, il écrit des textes aussi pour les jeunes. Mais en dehors de ça… si j'ai envie d'écrire un texte, je suis femme je le fais en H. sans problème.

Sans problème. Mais c'est plus dans les réactions après…

Exact

Et vous y répondez, vous réagissez ou … ?

Ah Ça dépend si c'est dans un truc public, que la personne s'adresse à moi oui. Mais si c'est quelqu'un à la radio, je ne peux pas répondre non. Mais en public oui, on peut réagir.

Et est-ce que vous vous considérez comme féministe ?

Ah non, mais chaque fois qu'on veut me marcher dessus oui ; quand on me laisse tranquille non, mais si on veut me marcher dessus oui. Voilà

Mais pas dans une organisation ?

Non, aucune.

Juste au niveau familial, vous êtes mariée ?

Oui, je me suis mariée en 1977. 41 ans de mariage en juillet, c'est long hein.

Et vous avez des enfants ?

Oui et je suis grand-mère.

Combien d'enfants ?

2 garçons

qui sont ici en H?
Mon ainé est aux Etats-Unis, et le second ici en Haïti.

Et ils font quoi ?

Mon ainé est dans la gastronomie. Et le deuxième a suivi son père et il travaille plus dans l'économie.

Ah d'accord. Donc votre mari travaille dans l'économie ?

Oui, il est aussi un peu à la retraite. Il Fait un peu des consultations à son rythme.

Et il écrit aussi ?

Non.

Et ils vous lisent… ils vous encouragent

Ah ben oui, oui. Je ne serai pas arrivée là sans le support de la famille. On ne peut pas faire ça en tant que femme si on est pas soutenu.

A quel niveau ?

Ben tout. Même partir 15 jours, il faut quand même qui s'occupe de la maison. Je me réveille plus tard, je suis bien aidée.

Et pour l'écriture, la relecture ?

Non, je ne fais relire par personne. Je travaille, je vais jusqu'au bout, et c'est après que je peux soumettre. Mais je ne fais pas relire des chapitres, des choses comme cela.

Et vous corrigez beaucoup ?

Oui, oui jusqu'à la dernière minute, je corrige, jusqu'à la dernière minute.

Et vous écrivez plutôt le jour ou la nuit

La nuit, quand la maison est tranquille, c'est plus facile.

Ok. Après j'ai une question sur le créole. Vous écrivez en français, avec parfois quelques mots de créole et un lexique à la fin du livre.

Oui, moi ça ne me pose aucun problème de ne pas écrire en Créole parce que, ma génération à l'école on avait pas appris le créole, même si on parle créole. C'est pas parce qu'on parle créole, qu'on peut devenir écrivain du créole, parce que tous les français seraient écrivains. Je pense que c'est tout un apprentissage… Parce qu'il y a la langue de tous les jours, et il y a la langue littéraire quand même il faut travailler dessus, on ne peut pas se dire comme ça, je vais me faire... Pas évident.

Non

Non.

Et vous vous considérez comme une écrivaine haïtienne j'imagine.

Oui.

Et le terme « francophone », qu'est-ce que vous en pensez ?
Pour moi on a fait la francophonie avant l'invention du terme, donc je ne me sens pas liée. D'ailleurs, j'ai écrit un article pour libé là-dessus. « Brève chronique d'une délocalisation » . D'ailleurs les H. n'ont pas tellement profité de la francophonie. Des mannes, si mannes il y a, ça reste beaucoup une histoire de la France et de l'Afrique. Donc.

Et comment vous voyez l'avenir de la littérature en Haïti ?

Ben je trouve qu'elle est plus rassurante qu'en France. Non, je n'ai pas vraiment de souci parce que je pense qu'il y a une relève qui est intéressante. Maintenant c'est la place de la litt peut être dans le monde, qui change énormément, qui se restreint. Je laisse la réponse aux générations futures, c'est à eux de savoir.

Et quels conseils vous donneriez à quelqu'un qui voudrait écrire ?

s'il a envie oui. Oui absolument. Ne pas se laisser intimider par le fait que la société devient une société où peut être la littérature n'a pas autant de place par rapport à ce qu'elle avait il y a 30 ans.

Et par rapport à la France ?

C'est pareil, je pense que les gens sont encore plus qu'ici. Quand on regarde proportionnellement au nombre de librairies, au nombre de maisons d'édition, au niveau de l'éducation en France, je trouve qu'H. se débrouille pas mal.

Oui pour finir, je voulais un peu parler de Bain de lune, que j'avais lu très attentivement. Je me demandais, parce que l'écrivain se fait un peu la voix de ceux

qui n'ont pas accès …et en même temps l'écrivain parle au nom d'une réalité qui n'est pas forcément la sienne …comment cela se joue ?

En fait, c'est un roman un peu décolonial parce que même quand Roumain parle, c'est une 3ème personne qui parle. Là j'ai renversé la perspective. Cette personne-là, j'ai essayé de décrire, comment cette majorité voit le monde, comment elle se vit…

Mais vous parlez en leur nom, c'est la même chose pour le sociologue pour…comment tenter d'être au plus près…je sais que vous avez fait beaucoup d'entretiens…

Ben oui ça demande du temps, ça demande du temps. Parce qu'on est tous formaté pour ne pas comprendre.

Voilà oui et des représentations qui pèsent depuis des générations…

On est vraiment formaté pour ne pas comprendre. C'est pour cela que j'étais même très étonné est-ce que les gens, surtout en France vont comprendre ? Il y en a qui n'ont pas compris. Ils ne comprennent pas les rapports homme/femmes là-bas. Ils s'imaginent Simone de Beauvoir… Leur expliquer que la majorité du monde ne fonctionne pas selon le modèle de Simone de Beauvoir, c'est pas évident.

Oui, oui. Pourquoi ils étaient choqués que…

Pas choqués mais ils ont pas compris. Ils comprennent pas. Quand un roman est urbain, ils accrochent davantage. Peut- être qu'en H. aussi les jeunes urbains ont plus aimé *Guillaume et Nathalie* et *Douces déroutes*. Cela se rapproche plus de leur univers. Voilà.

Oui parce que vous avez aussi un engagement associatif…

Oui j'accompagne, surtout un projet de jeunes au bas de la ville de PAP, qui s'appelle ?(inaudible) je suis la marraine de l'association.

Ah oui et vous les accompagnez…

Ils n'ont même pas besoin de moi en fait. Je suis là, je les aide, mais ils font très bien. Il existe depuis 30 ans quand même, 25-30 ans quand même, déjà une génération. Cela s'adresse aux jeunes de moins de 30 ans.

Et l'objectif de l'association ?

C'est de promouvoir tout ce qui est littéraire, culturel. Ils font des rencontres entre les Lycées, les écoles du bas de la ville. Ils font des tas de choses. Pendant toute l'année, il y a des lycées, des écoles qui viennent pour des concours de culture générale et ils

font une grande finale. Pendant l'été, ils font des ateliers de littérature, des spectacles, ils invitent des conférenciers pendant l'année aussi.

Et ce sont des jeunes de tous milieux sociaux ?
Jeunes pas de tous milieux, des jeunes de milieux vraiment pas favorisés, pas favorisés du tout. Mais bon, ils arrivent en se débrouillant à réaliser des miracles.

Bon j'ai trouvé que Bain de lune, je l'ai un peu rapproché du mouvement des créoliste, ou plutôt de Glissant, qui dans le discours antillais parle de « raturage de l'histoire » des sociétés créoles qui n'ont pas d'histoire, selon l'histoire officielle…

Oui sauf que la créolité dont parlent Glissant, Chamoiseau, elle concerne en fait la population qui est exposée à l'occident. La population dont je parle dans *Bain de lune* qui a tendance à s'amenuiser d'ailleurs en raison de l'urbanisation, elle n'est pas créole. Elle est juste elle-même puisqu'elle n'a pas de contacts avec l'occident, elle s'est construite de manière complètement homogène, même s'il y a des influences. C'est pas une societé créole.

Oui d'accord. Leur histoire a été quand même…

C'est la déportation.

Oui et après, je ne sais pas si on peut parler d'amnésie nationale, mais il y a eu deux histoires parallèles. L'histoire héroïque d'Haïti, de l'élite et la campagne haïtienne…

Tout à fait. La campagne haïtienne, c'est un refus, contrairement aux autres qui ont continué dans la plantation, cette culture s'est construite dans l'opposition à la plantation.

Oui avec les lakous, l'agriculture sur des petites propriétés…

Exactement. Si on ne comprend pas ça, on peut pas comprendre ce qui s'est passé en Haïti. C'est un refus de la culture de la plantation.

Et il y a toujours ce désir de rester très indépendants ?

Non les choses ont quand même évoluées parce qu'il n'y a plus cette cassure aussi étanche qu'elle était. Il y a une ouverture sur le monde maintenant. Mais au départ c'était ça. Et je crois que tous les mécanismes culturels qui ont été développés, c'est à partir de ça. Si on veut comprendre…Pourquoi il y a des choses qui ne prendront pas, pourquoi il y a des recettes qui ne marcheront pas ? C'est une coupure par rapport à toute une logique de la plantation qui est une logique matérialiste, qui est une logique capitaliste, tout ce qu'on veut. C'est tout un autre modèle de société, complètement différent, le partage en fait.

Et ils étaient propriétaires de petites parcelles. Et ils le restent jusqu'à aujourd'hui ?

Ah oui, même si la paysannerie est en train de se paupériser pour des tas et des tas de raisons.

Et j'ai beaucoup aimé aussi votre premier roman Dans la maison du père et le thème de la danse. Et je me demandais si les danses afro-haïtiennes étaient toujours mal vues ?

A l'époque où moi je grandissais, la petite bourgeoisie, la grande bourgeoisie, c'était absolument des danses de sauvages. Moi, j'ai eu la chance, mes parents m'ont laissé faire des cours, j'ai commencé à 7, 8 ans à faire des danses haïtiennes. Donc j'ai eu cette chance là. Mais à l'époque, c'était mal vue. Donc *Dans la maison du père*, c'est exactement le contraire. Donc chez moi, ça n'a jamais été une interdiction. Les gens disent ah oui, c'est autobiographique. Mais non, c'est justement le contraire. J'ai jamais eu d'interdits.

Mais vous l'avez vu…

Ah oui autour de moi, beaucoup.

Et pour finir Failles qui porte sur le tremblement de terre, je trouvais intéressant car il y a aussi toute une réflexion sur le travail de l'écrivain. Et 8 ans après, est-ce que vous voyez des changements ?

Mais quand même, il y avait un camp juste en face pendant 1 et demi ou 2 ans ici.Mais en même temps on a jamais eu d'émeutes. Quand on me dit que le peuple haïtien est violent, je dis wao attention… parce que dans un autre pays, vous auriez une situation comme ça, les gens cassent les vitres… personne n'a rien eu dans le quartier. Vous prenez Miami, Paris, n'importe quelle autre grande métropole, les disparités, pas d'électricité, très peu de policiers... Le lendemain, vous n'avez pas un seul magasin. Non, je pense qu'ils sont encore très patients les Haïtiens.

Est-ce qu'écrire : est-ce que ça a changé après le tremblement de terre ?

Ah non, on continue de la même façon. Non mais c'était un coup sur le moment, on se demande à quoi cela sert…

Oui oui. C'est-à-dire qu'ici, il semble que l'écrivain porte une responsabilité…ou il y a un engagement…

Peut-être plus qu'en France ou aux Etats-Unis.

Est-ce qu'on vous sollicite beaucoup … comment vous le vivez ?

Les jeunes me sollicitent beaucoup. Les jeunes beaucoup mais là je ne peux pas suivre parce qu'ils font tout le temps des évènements, c'est assez fatiguant. Je ne peux pas suivre tout le temps. Mais eux ils sont encore vivants, ils sont dans la jeunesse je refuse parce que je ne peux pas tout suivre. Mais ils sont jeunes, c'est normal. Mais les autres sont complètement blasés. Le gouvernement et ce que j'appelle les héritiers ils s'en foutent. Ce qui peut se passer dans les arts... complètement.

Et est-ce qu'on vous sollicite pour donner votre opinion politique puisqu'il y a un certain engagement ?

En général je refuse. Mais si on me demande, je fermerai le ministère de la culture. Cela ne sert à rien puisqu'il n'y a pas de politique culturelle. On en a eu une mais il n'y en a plus.

Et au niveau du cinéma, j'en profite puisque vous avez travaillé avec Raoul Peck…

Et le Cinéma, il y a le cineinstitute qui est à Jacmel. Mais le cinéma demande des moyens, pas évident de pouvoir faire du cinéma dans un pays comme H. On peut tenter si on vient d'ailleurs. Raoul a fait des films ici mais il amène son équipe, amène tout sur place, le producteur, les acteurs…
Mais bon, il y en a qui essaient de faire des petits documentaires. Ils travaillent en général pour les ONG et font les documentaires en général de quelque chose. Pas facile.

INTERVIEW WITH with Yanick Lahens, Petionville, restaurant « Le quartier latin », June 8, 2018 at 11 :15 AM.

TRANSLATION Alex LENOBLE

Could you speak a bit about your family's origins, what your parents did, your grandparents… and I know that you spent part of your childhood in France…

Didn't grow up there, I finished my studies in France but I grew up here, in Haiti.

and your parents…

Haitian parents, haitian grandparents. I believe that my grandparents were the first to come to Port-au-Prince from a provincial town. My mother then grew up, spent her early childhood in the Gonaives but after that, she stayed in Port-au-Prince. My father was from another area. And he finished high school and since then we have been we people from Port-au-Prince.

And what were their professions?

My father was an economist. My mother started to study, she was gifted in drawing, she is gifted in several areas: drawing, cooking. Then, she got a scholarship, she went to France. When she came back, she started cooking professionally, making pastries, cooking and she spent all her life working in gastronomy.

What level of education did she reach?

Ah, back then it was the "brevet supérieur." She completed her "brevet supérieur." My father studied, well, he was very bright, because their families didn't have a lot of money. He received the first prize and got a scholarship from the Economics department at the university.

What did his parents do?

Ah well, his parents were teachers. And his mother was more into business. Given that he was a laureate in the department of Economics, he got a scholarship, he went to France. He did his specialization in France for five years; he never came back.

Did he do a PhD?

Yes he did a PhD.

Ah ok. He did his phD and then he came back?

Exactly.

To work as an economist or as a professor?

Both.

And he worked for the government?

Yes, he worked for the government, but he was first a professor. Jean-Claude Fignolé was one of his students who always talked to me about him; I think Frankétienne was too.

Ah yes. And your mother, what did her parents do?

My grandfather was in the military, he was a captain in the army. And my grandmother on my mother's side was the one who introduced my mother to everything related to cooking, baking; she was very good at it.

Very well. She also had her business?

Yes, yes, until the end, then my mother, little by little, took over. There, my mother's business was much more professional.

And she had a restaurant?

No, it was a catering firm, not a restaurant. She was one of the first to do… weddings, she would build things and then she would make a very spectacular cake and people would love that. That's it.

And you, you grew up in Port-au-Prince, here?

Well, I was born at home, I mean, at my parents' home in Pétion-Ville. But Pétion-Ville back then was a holiday town, the streets were not asphalted. There was very little construction. It was a village, outside of Port-au-Prince and I was born at home, on Faubert Street.

Faubert Street…

Yes, where the Sogebank is. Right there, where the parking lot of the Sogebank is, was the family house, on my mother's side.

And so, you did your primary, secondary education here in Pétionville?

No, at the Catholic school Sainte Rose de Lima – it was run by nuns.

In Port-au-Prince. Then you had to go down.

Yes, but back then (we talked about this yesterday), there was more social diversity, I took a van.

It was like public transportation.

Yes, people from diverse social backgrounds met together; this is not the case anymore today. I think diversity is regressing. No, at the time, I wouldn't dare asking my parents to drive me to school, never. I walked, I took the van, I came back home.

I see. And there was also less traffic.

Less traffic and not this population density which means that means now, in order to get into a *tap tap,* you have to put up a fight in the morning. So, inevitably it becomes complicated.

Yes, those who can afford it prefer driving.

Totally. Or there are small buses, you pay a monthly fee for a subscription.

Ah that's good. Does it still exist?

Yes, even more so than before.

High school was at the same location.

No, no, I was with the nuns. It was not high school. Because you know that the state only financially supports 10% of the schools; 90% of schools are private – more or less good schools but private schools. So, I was with the nuns, at Sainte Rose de Lima.

Ok, and then you went to France…

Yes. I completed my high school diploma in France and I studied French Literature.

Where in France?

I was still with nuns. I couldn't escape them!

But where?

It was called the course… (inaudible). In Paris. And then, I went to the Sorbonne, Paris 3, then Paris 4.

So, it was in the 60's-70's…

I finished in 77-78.

Any particular memory of France…

Oh yes, a lot even. I studied there, it was there that I met a lot of Haitian people who I would certainly not have met in Haiti. So, I discovered a lot of aspects of Haiti that I wasn't previously aware of.

In Paris?

Oh yes. First the students I met, they were often people who left because they went on strike in Haiti, a lot of political exiles so it's a whole side of Haiti I didn't know about. I can say that I too learned a lot about Haiti when I was in France.

And so it was students who were studying or…

Yes, some of them were studying. Some of them were way older than me and in fact worked. But everyone got together and in my age group, students from Haiti, we revived the Haitian Students Association in Paris, so everyone gathered around this association, these were good times. So there was every possible political orientation, well, those who were far left, left, those who were not left to a certain extent. Everyone gathered and we had a lot of activities.

And so, what types of activities?

Cultural activities, a lot. Debates, we had with us Hervé Denis, who was, who worked in the theatrical troupe of Jean-Marie Sérault, so he was someone who had very good theatrical training, so we set up performances. There were a lot of things. I also remember the screening of *Gouverneurs de la rosée*. When Telvic did *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, there was a screening organized by the association.

And there were also political debates?

Yes, but we had them more on the side because we didn't want to disturb the functioning of the association. But we had political debates, yes. There were people who were… Serge, he was the leader of Cimade, we welcomed refugees, there were people from the PUCH, the Haitian Communist Party who were there. There, I met René Théodore for the first time. At the time, I didn't even know, he was totally living clandestinely so he had an alias when he came.

Did you meet other people from Africa, from the diaspora?

Ah yes, inevitably, when you're in school, I was very good friend with Nedim Durcel, who is a very famous Turkish novelist, we remained friends to this day. So, we even studied together. I also had Senegalese, Tunisian friends, a lot of different nationalities and also French.

Ok, so this has been a very educational experience?

Ah yes, yes, very very educational. And, a French friend who remained my friend to this day. When I go to France, I stay at her place. Yes, really an eye-opening experience, and at the same time, because it is very well known, often you discover your own country when you are away from it. So, each time I come back to Haiti, it was an opportunity for me to look deeper into it.

Yes, you come back with new eyes.

Exactly.

Ok, ok. And so how long did you stay there studying?

Until the DEA [the second year of the Master's degree at the time]. So how many years? Quite a bit. Eight years maybe.

And then you came back…

Yes

This was your choice…

Ah, yes, completely. Since I could return, I did. Some people couldn't return, so they stayed. But I was able to, so I chose to return.

What were your prospects?

Working in Haiti. I taught for quite a bit of time.

At the école normale…

Yes, a secondary school for a short time. But mainly I taught at the university.

So you were a literature professor there?

Yes, literature. Because I studied literature. So, it was more Haitian literature, literature and society, comparative literature.

And was it also an interesting experience there?…

Very much so. In fact, when you teach, you rediscover some things too. And it also allowed me to look at the evolution of the Haitian society in every way, sociological, political, economical.

Because Ecole normale is a public institution?

Yes.

So you were a civil servant?

Yes.

And do you have siblings?

One sister, one brother.

And what did they do?

She went into medicine, he was an engineer. But he changed paths and went into sport politics.

Sport politics, what does that mean?

Well, politics, yes, because well, he is not an athlete. He is much more interested in the sports sector organization. He is part of the Haitian Olympic Committee but it's kind of complicated to work independently and to be able to influence, very complicated. So, he became almost an international expert, now on the Caribbean. He worked a lot for the integration of Guadeloupe and Martinique in the local competitions. Because before they were attached to France, which is absolutely ridiculous. He worked a lot on this issue. So, a lot of things and now he works on Latin America too. So he practically became an expert.

Independant consultant.

Yes, in sports politics. He is based in Haiti.

And your sister?

She studied medicine in Haiti. She went to France for her specialization in geriatrics. She was the first woman, the first geriatric woman doctor in Haiti. She practised here.

Then, after a while, she told me, no, I am leaving and then she left and moved to the US, in Florida.

Ok… And have you always thought of becoming a writer or was it something that came later?

Well, I wrote small things but not really with the intention of getting published.

From what age?

I don't remember. I published… I think it was when I read Marie Chauvet that something clicked and after I wrote my essay "Entre l'ancrage et la fuite." Then I told myself: Ok, take the plunge.

Ah ok. So, it was later when…

Later. I was probably in my thirties.

You were already a professor…

Ah yes, while I was a professor.

When you were younger, here in Haiti or after at the University, did you write a little?

Since school, poetry contests, things like that, but I didn't show others, I kept it to myself.

You were not thinking of doing something with it?

No, that wasn't my intention back then.

What about reading, you read a lot, I imagine, especially while studying literature…

A lot. I didn't really have a choice. I did it because I liked it and also because it was my job. It's part of the deal.

Did you have a specialization at the University or did you read anything?

Not really. I did everything… because of the shortcomings there were, you had to make up for a lot of things, but I studied Haitian literature. I studied Comparative Literature, Marie Chauvet, Faulkner, I studied Camus… so many things.

But when you were a student, did you have a specialization?

Comparative literature with Etiemble. Back then, Etiemble was still alive, I did my Master's degree with him, the *maitrise* year and the DEA year, I studied many things: I studied the novel, with Chevrier, Francophone Literature, Liliane Kestelot. Back then for the DEA, we had to take 4 courses. And for each course, we had to submit a paper.

And your Masters thesis, what was it about ?

It was about Haitian Literature.

Ah, then you were already…

Yes, absolutely, but it was difficult to find someone at the time. Finally, he learnt with me, he discovered Haitian literature with me, because he was the expert, one of the first in African literature, so he discovered Haitian literature with me.

Would you have had opportunities to teach in France?

At the time, no, I didn't even try.

Ok. And you were the only Haitian in the program?

Yes, in the program, I was never with other Haitians. Then I met Haitians through the Haitian channels. There was a Haitian, she was more into biology and environmental sciences since it was the beginning back then. Then there was another Haitian, Patricia Benoit, who became a filmmaker, she was doing small films. But I was really the only woman.

And so, there was nothing about Haitian Literature.

Nothing or very little. I did my own business in a way.

And nothing about the Caribbean, Martinique or Guadeloupe either?

No. There was some maybe but not in the seminars I took. I didn't even take a course with Jacques Chevrier, I chose him as my Master's director but I took a course with Etiemble who taught a survey of Comparative Literature, so it's more general, methodology, he really was a big name in Comparative Literature and I did my thesis with him.

Maryse Condé – she was not there yet. I think she taught a few courses there but proably later.

No, she was never my professor.

Did you read Caribbean writers, Aimé Césaire…

Certainly, inevitably. I still have the Presence Africaine editions of all these people. I discovered everything at this time.

In Paris. Energetic back then.

Oh yes. The conversations between… Haitians were much more politi, sometimes very specific, we'd stay at a table in a coffee shop for hours. All of this, I discovered in France through books.

A little about intellectual movements.

I was never an activist and never belonged to a party and I think I will die without campaigning for a party. But I was close to many of these parties which were represented, political parties with branches in France back then. I spent time with them the way I spent time with other people who were not in the parties and that's it.

And the author that was the most influential in your writing career: maybe Marie Chauvet.

Certainly. Also, Jacques-Stephen Alexis. Also, Jacques Roumain, yes.

You discovered them here?

For Jacques Stephen Alexis, it was here. Before leaving; I was very young. Then Jaques Roumain immediatly after.

What did you read when you were young? Was it rather Classic French Literature or everything?

Classic French Literature, when you are in school here, you don't really have a choice. Now, it was when I arrived in France that I discovered American Literature which, I like a lot.

With comparative literature.

Enormously.

And you carried on by being a professor here.

Yes, that's it.

Ok. So concerning your writing, it was short stories at first…?

Yes. First an essay then short stories and a novel.

Yes Dans la maison du père. But the short stories had been published…

La petite corruption in 1999, around the same year as *Dans la maison du père*.

And why did you choose to write short stories at first ?

Well, I don't know, it was what came to me…

And getting published, was it difficult or how did that go?

Hmm, the short stories, I just sent them to L'Harmattan. But L'Harmattan doesn't pay. I never got royalties.

Really ?

Never until this day.

And did you know someone at L'Harmattan ?

No, I just sent them like that.

And they said ok.

Yes. And then with *Dans la maison du père,* it was about the same, with Le serpent à plume.

Ah yes, I met them in Paris last year.

But at the time, Pierre Astier was the litterary agent.

Did you know him at the time, or did you send it like before?

I didn't; I just sent it. I think he was looking for… he was doing a small collection of short stories and I sent a short story.
Hmm ok. It was for their special issue.

And from there, we built a connection and then afterwards, I sent him… after the short story, I sent the novel.

And did you win any prizes for the short stories?

No, I didn't. My first prize was for *Dans la maison du père*. No prizes for the short stories.

Ok, and the transition to novels, it was…

They are constructed differently. It is really about having a long-term perspective. It is like running a Marathon or the 100 meters, it is not the same thing. Necessarily, it is more perseverance, more… some people can do both. But I cannot do both. Some people say, "I could never write short stories again." It depends. At that moment, I wrote a lot more novels but there was nothing to say I could never…

Poetry?

No, I don't think I'm talented enough. But I greatly admire poets. I read a lot but…

Why are you saying that you are not talented enough?

I didn't try, I didn't even try. Maybe I don't have that way of reasoning… You also have to have something of the non-rational. And I am mostly rational.

Interesting… And so, the first novel, you were still a professor?

Yes, hmmm no, no, because I quit teaching in 95. It was in 1999. No, I already quit teaching.

How did you earn your living?

Ah well, I worked on a project, "Route de l'esclavage."

Ah yes, yes, you did a…. we're going back to your professional life.

With Raoul Peck.

And what made you quit teaching?

Hmmm no, it was complicated. It was complicated… because the school management, I thought it was becoming anarchical. And it remained so.

How so ?

In every way. I was a member of the school's first elected executive board after the departure of the Duvalliers. I was not even a candidate to anything since I don't like this too much. The students came to me, Madame Lahens, are you sure? Yes, you must Madame Lahens. You know… I said, all right… but… and it worked really well. We reorganized the departments, everything was working amazingly well. And then, when I left, they stopped.

Since it was working, why did you leave?

No, no, it wasn't working anymore. The Canadian program came practically to a stop and then… hmmm… a kind of… I don't know, administrative chaos, etc. I told the students, no, no no. So, I went through with the mandate. And then, wow, it was complicated.

So, you looked for another job…

Well, yes, since I know Raoul well…

Yes, ok, Raoul Peck.

With Raoul Peck, Philip Dalembert who is also a writer and me. Philippe had been my student, in one of my first cohorts, and since I started to teach at a young age, we were maybe 5 or 6 years apart, so we became great friends until this day.

And what was your role here?

I was at the head of his staff.

And concretely, it was about organizing…

Yes, since he is very good at organizing, he really is a film director, he has the right mind, the ideas. It wasn't difficult to follow all the files, the cultural politics, how we saw this. He was one of the last to have a vision of the cultural politics. Today, there is no one left.

And it was under Aristide?

Under Préval.

Préval ok. And what was the vision, I imagine there were a lot of projects

Well, yes, a lot of projects, first Arts Education in schools, there was… Restoring heritage monuments and turn them into cultural sites in several provinces. He also wanted to renovate the national school of Arts so that it would follow up on the specialized Arts studies in high schools. Everything fell apart, unfortunately!

And you did stay for two years?

With Raoul Peck? I don't think I stayed that long. I didn't stay until the end of his mandate. And I also went with Laennec Hurbon who is also a friend, to the Slave Route project.

Ah yes, ok. And this was interesting?

Very interesting.

And for how long?

I don't remember, maybe 2 years. It was a really interesting project because there again, it is a whole other aspect of the history of slavery, the role of Haiti, I learned a lot. And at the same time, I don't remember the year, we were part of the editorial board of *Chemin critique*, an extremely important journal, a foundationnal moment for Haitian thought.

And you were at the origin of the journal's creation?

Laennec was the one who started it but I was a member of the first editorial board. It was incredible, it was really a great time.

And then, there was the *Slave Route* project and after ?

Afterwards, no. Afterwards I gave lessons, I gave seminars, to make some money. And I kept on writing. This was the time when I really started writing…

So, you freed up some time to really focus on your writing.

Yes, since the children were growing up, I started to have more time.

And you were giving seminars here in Haiti?

Yes, yes in Haiti, abroad not really, I may have given one or two in the US, Guadeloupe, Martinique, once in Guadeloupe but that was it.

So Serpent à plume. And then in 2008, *La couleur de l'aube.*

Yes, it took me some time, I took time to write. And then it was with Sabine Wespiser.

And how did you discover this publishing house…

It was by chance. There was a cultural event at the Citadelle. My husband was there, there was a mutual friend who told me : "I will introduce you to someone" – well – "maybe you have a manuscript." I said : "Hmmm yes, I have a manuscript." He told me: "send it." And he gave me his card, that was it.

By chance.

Totally

Because it was relatively new publishing house. Well, from the 2000's.

Launched in 2000, 2002.

2002. Yes. And since then, you stayed with them…

Yes.

So, you signed a contract.

Each time. But I am very pleased, very very pleased. I won't change, not now, no, not at all. I even had offers but I am not interested.

What is it that makes you really satisfied?

Well, everything, everything. There are not many authors, they treat us well, she cares about her writers. Really, I don't know what I would go seeking elsewhere.

And then, there was Guillaume et Nathalie, then Bain de Lune and Douce déroute.

Yes, and then there was Failles as well.

Ah yes Failles, written after the earthquake. Written fast?

Very fast.

So, each time, it was a positive experience…

Yes.

And I imagine the Femina Prize

Ah well, yes, that too. Frankly, I absolutely did not expect it. First, because the year before, there was Leonora Miano who had gotten the Femina. Then, I was already on the our pick for 4 groups of writers; so I was already very happy. And, hmmm, I went back to Haiti. During my trip in September for the promotion of my book, and then one fay, Sabine tells me: "You're on the Femina's shortlist." I told her: "You're kidding." "I will send you a journal article, a link." So, she sent it to me. We were together in Strasbourg. Very good, for me it was good. And I went back to Haiti at the

end of September. For that matter, I went to my son's wedding at the end of September. It unfolded, it unfolded. And after a while, she told me: "Ah well, you have to come back earlier." I told her: "It's ridiculous, I'll never win this prize." I was supposed to come back on a Tuesday or Wednesday. The prize was going to be announced on a Monday. "Well, no, try to get here on Sunday." I told her: "Well no, spend money to change the flights." Then well, I said: "If you want, I'll come, I don't mind." And this is how, the day before, the day before, really relaxed, not stressed at all… she was very stressed. Well, I got it !

Excellent.

No, it was good news.

And do a lot of people in Haiti read your books?

Yes, because, I always had the possibility to have haitian editions from the start. I negociated with Sabine, so that the books are sold for four times less.

Four time less expensive, ok. And who prints them then?

Haitian publishers.

The Haitian editions. I happened to have bought one of those yesterday, "La couleur de l'aube", a small format.

Orange ?

Yes.

This is a whole story. It's the same Sabine Wespiser edition but she did it in paper back format. At the beginning, when the book was published, I did it at the author expense with the National Presses, not at the author's expense… I don't remember… After *Failles*, it was at the author's expense. It was 2000 copies, they went fast.

Ah ok. So, it was a printer with the cover of Sabine Wespiser.

No, no, nothing to do with the cover. Actually, the text *Failles* is now in Sabine's paperback collection.

Ok so, the Haitian edition is completely different. But it allows for a much more affordable price. Ok, so book distribution works well here.

There is someone who takes care of the book distribution in addition to printing texts. There are newer publishing houses too, there are two or three. There is someone who

manages the diffusion. So, when there are events, she takes the books from the publishers and circulate them.

But, excuse me, the publication here in Haiti, it is with a Haitian publishing house or just a printer ?

It depends. If it is at the author's expense, you go to a printer. If you go through a Haitian publisher, it is a publishing house.

And what do you do?

I did both. For *La couleur de l'aube* and *Failles*, I did it myself. And for the publishing house, Legs edition, they took short stories that I wrote. Then, they take care of everything.

And even the distribution.

Everything.

And for *Bain de Lune*?

Bain de lune – there is a paperback Seuil edition so the price is more affordable.

Ah ok, so there is a Seuil paper back edition. I didn't know, and it is distributed even in France…

Yes, yes. There is also a Seuil edition of *Guillaume et Nathalie*. I think *Douces Déroutes*, they ask for it too.

The Seuil editions?

Yes, I think, according to what Sabine told me.

And Douce déroute, it worked well? It is very recent. You were in Paris not so long ago.

Very much. Very recent. Exhausted. I came back onmpletely exhausted. I made a first fifteen days trip in March. A second trip of almost 17 days, and I'm coming back now: exhausting.

So, you are touring…

No, it's over now.

But when you were in France, you toured the book stores?

Book stores, radio shows, television, festivals.

And it worked well ? because I imagine you are starting to be known there since Bain de lune?

Yes, and even before *Bain de lune* and now, after *Bain de lune*, yes.

And here in Haiti, you are going to tour?

No, I was in a show with Dangelo, signings at La Pléiade, small tours in the provinces.

Yes. So now, you focus completely on writing?

Hmm well yes, I am retired, I… it's a lot already

As for the critical reception, are you interested in the critics?

What they say about my book?

Yes

Usually, I don't watch the shows I was in, I don't listen to them. I move forward. What's done is done.

But regarding the literary critics…

Yes, I read them, I read them.

Does it have an influence on you or not really…

No, but I still look at it. How people see. Often there are things you can't see yourself that others see. Thankfully. You also learn about yourself.

And from readers, you are getting feedbacks from readers too?

Hmmm, when I am in a book store, yes. People react, tell me what they think, so yes.

And do you see a difference in terms of recepetion between France and Haiti?

There is not always a big difference but often there are differences, inevitably. People don't live the same realities. People in France have a certain idea of Haiti so you always have to explain. Even the people here, one shouldn't believe that people

always take the necessary distance from their own reality. So, you know… no, but it's different, necessarily.

And from the Caribbean or abroad, do you get feedback?

Well, in the Caribbean, we don't have much connections. Abroad yes, there are the English publications. For *Moonbath* I had good feedback. I can't complain. It's good. Well, it was a bit new for the people to read something like this in Haiti.

Are you in touch with other writers? In Haiti, I imagine.

Yes, the closest is Gary Victor with whom I collaborate, I work. Louis Philippe Dalembert a lot too who is still a friend. Abroad, Russel Banks, who I like as well, who became a friend because he is a friend of Raoul Peck. And yes, with say, these writers, I am in touch, I exchange. I exchange with Gisèle Pineau. Maybe it is the little trio.

Ok, but these are more personal relationships?

That too, it's both.

Being a woman writer, was it an obstacle or not really?

No, here, it wasn't. Where it plays a difference is the way in which people might read the text, they will say it is a feminine text. But for writing, no, it doesn't.

Nor for publishing?

No, it really doesn't. But it will be elsewhere, in the reception, in the fact that people say there are women characters… rather in the reception.

As for the literary critics and the readers too…

I think that in Haiti, people read women writers as much as male writers, today. There is an author who always scores big, it's Gary because well, he also writes texts for the youth. But apart from that… if I want to write a text, I am a woman, I do it in Haiti without any problem.

Without problems but it's more in the reactions afterwards.

Exactly.

And do you answer to this, do you react or…?

Hmmm, it depends, if it is a public thing, if the person addresses me, yes. But if it is someone on the radio, I cannot answer, no. But in public, yes, one can react.

And do you identify as a feminist?

No, but everytime someone wants to walk over me, yes. When they leave me alone, no. But if one wants to walk over me, yes. That's it.

But not in an organization?

No, none.

And as for your family situation, are you married?

Yes, I got married in 1977. 41 years of marriage in July, it's long, isn't it?

And do you have children?

Yes, and I am a grandmother.

How many children?

Two boys.

Who are here in Haiti?

My eldest is in the US and the second one here in Haiti.

And what do they do?

My eldest is in gastronomy. And the second one followed his father's tracks and works more in business.

Ah all right. So your husband also works in business?

Yes, he is also somewhat retired. He does some consultation at his own pace.

And he writes too?

No.

And do they read you… encourage you?

Well yes, yes. I wouldn't have made it so far without my family's support. One cannot do that as a woman without support.

How so?

Well, everything. Even leaving for 15 days, someone has to take care of the house. I wake up later, I have the help I need.

And what about the writing process, the proofreading?

No, nobody proofreads for me. I work, I go all the way, and then I can submit. But I don't have my chapters proofread, nothing like that.

And you edit a lot?

Yes, yes, until the last minute, I edit, until the last minute.

And do you write more during the day or at night?

At night, it's easier.

Ok. I also have a question about creole. You write in French, sometimes with some words in creole and a glossary at the end of the book.

Yes, I have no problem with not writing in Creole because in my generation, at school, we didn't learn creole even if we speak creole. It's not because you speak creole than you can become a creole writer, because every French person would be a writer. I think there is a whole learning process… Because there is the langage we use everyday, and there is the literary language, and you have to work on it, you can't decide like that, I will become… It's not obvious.

No

No.

And you identify as a haitian writer I imagine.

Yes.

And the term « Francophone », what do you think about it?

In my opinion, people were doing francophonie before the term existed, so I don't feel connected. Actually, I wrote an article for *Libération* about that, "Brève chronique

d'une délocalisation." As a matter of fact, the haitian people didn't really take advantage of the francophonie. Godsends if there are any godsends, it's more of an affair between France and Africa. So…

And how do you see the future of literature in Haiti?

Well, I think it is more reassuring than in France. No, I am not really concerned because I think there is an interesting succession. Now, it is the role of literature maybe in the world that changes a lot, that becomes more limited. I let the future generations answer, it is their role to decide.

And what would be your advice for someone who wants to write?

If they want to, yes. Absolutely. Don't let yourself be intimidated because our society becomes a society where literature has not as much importance compared to what it was 30 years ago.

And compared to France?

It's the same, I think people are even more than here… Proportionnally when looking at the number of book stores, the number of publishing houses, the level of education in France, I think that Haiti is doing pretty well.

Yes, to conclude, I wanted to talk a little but about *Bain de lune* that I read very carefully. I was wondering because the writer talks for those who don't have access …and at the same time the writer talks about a reality that is not necessarily her's… how does this play out?

Actually, it is a bit of a decolonial novel because even when Roumain talks, it is a third person who talks. Here, I inverted the perspective. This person, I tried to describe how this majority sees the world, how it experiences itself…

But you speak in their names, it is the same thing for the sociologist for… how to be as close as possible… I know that you worked with a lot of interviews…

Well, yes, it takes time. Because we are all conditionned not to understand.

Yes and representations that weigh since generations…

We are really conditionned not to understand. It is the reason why I was very surprised, will people, especially in France will they understand? Some didn't. They don't understand men/women relationships there. They think Simone de Beauvoir… Explain to them that the majority of the world doesn't work according to Simone de Beauvoir's model is not easy.
Yes, yes. Why, they were shocked that…

Not shocked but they didn't understand. They don't understand. In the case of an urban novel, they get more into it. Maybe in Haiti as well, the young city dwellers prefered *Guillaume et Nathalie* and *Douces déroutes*. It is closer to their universe. That's it.

Yes, because you are also involved in the community

Yes, I especially help with a project for the youth at the bottom of the city of PAP, it is called? (inaudible) I am the sponsor of the association.

Yes, and you help them…

They don't even need me actually. I am here, I help them, but they are managing very well. It's been around for 30 years, 25-30 years, already a generation. It is aimed towards the young under 30.

And the goal of the Association?

It is to promote everything related to literature, culture. They organize exchanges between high schools, schools from down the city. They do a whole lot of things. During the whole year, there are High schools, schools that come for general knowledge contests and there is a big final. During the summer, they organize literature workshops, shows, they invite speakers during the year also.

And these are young people from every social background?

Not from every social background, young people from less priviledged social backgrounds, not priviledged at all. But well, they manage to make miracles happen.

Well, I found that with *Bain de Lune* I compared it a bit to the creolist movement. Or rather to Glissant, who in *the Caribbean Discourse* talks about "raturage de l'histoire" – about creole communities who don't have a history, according to the official history…

Yes, except that the creolité that Glissant, Chamoiseau talk about, applies to the people exposed to the West. The people I speak about in *Bain de Lune* who as a matter of fact tend to diminish because of urbanization, are not creole. They are just themselves since they don't have any contact with the West. Their society was built in a completely homogeneous fashion, even if there are influences. It is not a creole society.

Yes. Still, their history was…

It is the deportation.

Yes, and afterwards I don't know if it is possible to talk about national amnesia, but there has been two histories in parallel. The heroic history of Haiti, the elite and the haitian countryside.

Exactly. The haitian countryside, it is a refusal, contrary to the others who kept on with the plantation, this culture developed in its opposition to the plantation.

Yes, with the Lakous, farming on the small properties…

Exactly. If you don't understand this, you can't understand what happened in Haiti. It is a refusal of the plantation culture.

And is there still this desire to stay very independant?

No, things have evolved because there's this fracture, as hermetic as it was, is now gone. There is an opening to the world now. But at the beginning that's what it was. And I think that all the cultural mecanisms that developed started from that. If one wants to understand… Why some things won't work out, why some recipes won't work out. It is a split from the whole plantation logic, which is a capitalist logic, everything you want. It is a whole other model of society, completely different, based on sharing in fact.

And they were owners of small plots. And are they still to this day?

Hmmm, yes, even if the peasantry is getting poorer for many many reasons.

And I really liked your last novel *Dans la maison du père* and the theme of dance. And I was wondering if afro-haitian dances are still frowned upon?

At the time I was growing up, for the petite bourgeoisie, the high bourgeoisie, it was absolutely viewed as savages' dances. I was lucky, my parents let me take lessons, I started around 7, 8 years old to participate in Haitian dances. So, I had this luck. But at the time, it was frowned upon. So, in *Dans la maison du père*, it is exactly the opposite. So, at home it had never been forbidden. People say: "hmmm yes, it's autobiographical." But no, it's actually the opposite. I was never subjected to interdictions.

But you witnessed it….

Ah yes, around me, a lot.

And to conclude… *Failles*, which is about the earthquake, I found interesting because there is also a whole reflection about the writer's work. And 8 years afterwards, do you see changes?

There was still a camp here, just across the street, for one year and a half to two years. But at the same time there has never been any riots. When I hear that the haitian people are violent, I say wow, careful… because in another country, if there was a situation like that, people would break glasses… nothing happened in the neighborhood. Let's take Miami, Paris, any other big city – inequality, no electicity, very little police presence… the day after, there wouldn't be any store left. No, I think that Haitians are still very patient.

Did writing change after the earthquake?

Hmm no, we keep going in the same way. No, but it was a shock at the time, we ask ourselves what the point is…

Actually here, it seems like the writer bears a responsibility, or there is an engagement…

Maybe more than in France or the US.

And are you very sough after ? How do you experience this?

The youth call upon me a lot. The youth a lot… But here I can't follow them because they are always organizing events; it's quite tiring. I can't always follow. But they're still alive, they're young. I refuse because I can't follow at all. But they're young; it's normal. But the others are completely blasé. The governement and the ones I call the successors, they don't care. What can happens in the Arts… completely.

Do they ask you to give political advice since there is a form of engagement?

Generally, I refuse. But if someone asks, I would close the ministry of culture. It is useless since there is no cultural politics. We had one, but no longer.

And what about cinema, I am taking advantage since you worked with Raoul Peck…

For the cinema, there is the 'Cine Institute'which is in Jacmel. But you need money, it is not easy to make movies in a country like Haiti. It might be possible for someone who comes from elsewhere. Raoul made movies here but he brings his team, brings everything here, the producer, the actors… Well, some try to make small documentaries. They generally work for the NGOs and make documentaries about something. Not easy.